An OWS Ink Dark Fairy Tale Anthology

Mirrors & Thorns

Mirrors & Thorns:
A Dark Fantasy Anthology
Presented by OWS Ink

From the twisted pens of:

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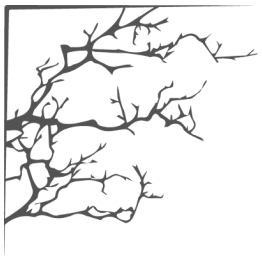

Young Blood
Kerry E.B. Black

THE TREES' ROOTS RUN deep, sopping up the blood of ancestors. They do not discriminate, these networked fingers, in their quest for nourishment. Their preferred sustenance, though, is that which pumped through human forms, and in the oldest of woods, the taste is refined. Although no meal will be left unsampled, the oldest ones crave young blood.

The newspapers fed the public's fascination with the case. Ten-year-old Jacob Miller of Enchiton, Pennsylvania claimed that he sold his four-year-old sister to an ugly elf. He stood, pale and slight, a scrawny, dark-haired boy whose head did not clear the second panel of the judge's mahogany bench.

Judge Kathleen Santiago had the dubious distinction of sitting the case. "I have listened to myriad psychiatric testimony regarding this case. The evidence points to a child involved in murder, though we have no body. A family stands to lose, not one but, two children." She glanced at the parents sitting in the front row behind their son, just as pale. Neither looked as though they slept recently, with their red-rimmed and over-bright eyes circled by purple and grey puffy rings.

"It is my decision," the grave Justice intoned, "that Jacob Miller be held for further evaluation at the county psychiatric hospital."

Cameras flashed. Mrs. Miller, Jacob's mother, hissed, "No!"

Her husband caught his wife as she collapsed. The judge pounded her gavel, saying, "Order in the court." The public in the gallery, however, disobeyed. Yells of "Murderer!" battled with "He's just a little boy." The bailiff escorted Jacob, whose head hung limp, from the courtroom.

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"Go home, Sasha!" Jacob said, scrambling down a hill in the woods behind his house.

“No, Jacob, Momma said I stay with you.” Sasha’s blonde curls bobbed as she struggled to keep up with her big brother. Her plump legs worked, and she exchanged her typical sunny face for a scowl.

“You’re such a pest! Leave me alone!” Downward facing brows darkened his narrowed eyes. He negotiated through brush to a clearing ringed with tall deciduous trees. He pulled his satchel over his head and dropped it with a clang and thud on the mossy ground. A brook gurgled over algae-covered rocks in the east. Birds’ songs and insect chirps formed musical duets. Violets colored the sparse grass, while wild flowers of white, purple, and pink perfumed the moist, late-spring air.

Sasha plopped on the ground beneath an elm, crushing two toadstools as she sat cross-legged. Her lower lip jutted in a profound pout. Her elbows pressed her knees, while her chin rested on her palms, disgruntled.

Jacob ignored her and set to work. Near the brook, close to the trunk of a large weeping willow, rested a pile of scavenged building supplies, cast-offs dumped in the woods by neighbors after remodeling projects. He hauled wood of various sizes and laid it out in the center of the clearing, matching pieces. He separated rotten pieces he hoped would hold together for his project.

From the bag he extracted a plastic container of nails and his father’s hammer. Then he started constructing his cabin. When finished, it would stand about the size of a dog’s house, he imagined, just big enough to escape the world for a while. He could read comics by flashlight or sort his baseball cards. He’d drag a plastic bin from his bedroom to hold things like toy cars. He sighed, contented, thinking about the private retreat.

Privacy grew more precious with each passing day. His parents demanded he “shoulder more responsibilities” since he was the oldest. His mom expected another baby in a few months. They said that when the baby came, if it was a boy, he’d need to share his room. If it was a girl, Sasha would have a new roommate.

Sasha already popped into his room nightly asking if he would play with her. Sasha did not respect his privacy. If that baby was a boy, he would never be alone. He needed quiet time to think.

Jacob smacked his fingers with a misplaced hammer blow. He winced and shook his hand. Sasha laughed. “Did you bang it, Jacob?” she giggled.

“No, I felt like shaking my hand, you dummy.”

“Hey, don’t call names, Jacob. It’s not nice.”

“Well, it’s not nice to laugh at me, either.” He thrust his fingers into his mouth.

He regarded his little sister. She looked like mom, sunny like a California beach. Everyone commented on her beauty, her cuteness.

They did not have to put up with her.

They did not compliment him, either.

Using his best persuasive voice, he asked, “Sasha, why don’t you just go home?” He opened his eyes wide, trying to look innocent. “Don’t you have some dolls that you want to play with or something?” He smiled to encourage her. *Please, Sasha, take the bait*, he thought.

“Nope. I’m staying.”

She resumed her inspection of a bit of foliage and hummed, “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” ignoring her brother’s glare.

A wind rose and blew the shaky walls over. Jacob stomped and threw his father’s hammer to the ground. It bounced on the moss, ricocheted off of a rock, and hit Sasha on the knee.

She wailed, “You did that on purpose, Jacob! I’m telling Mom!”

He hopped over to her, bouncing from leg to leg, hand to his lips. “No, I didn’t mean it to hit you, Sasha! Wait! Don’t tattle, please!”

She ran, though, chubby legs pumping up the hill and out of sight. He scrambled to catch up but slipped on a yellow and orange mushroom, smearing it into the loam. Mud marked his blue jeans and palms.

Great! he thought, *Do I go after her or just wait for my punishment?*

From behind him, Jacob heard a rustling like wind blowing old leaves. He looked over his shoulder, then started. A little man stepped from the shadow of an oak near the brook. He stood about Jacob’s height, but the wrinkles on his visage belied advanced age. His grey hair fell in scraggly knots to his stooped shoulders, and he wore a loose-fitting linen shirt tucked into dirty pants, belted with twine.

The little man scuffled to the cabin, tut-tutting over the fallen walls. Jacob faced him, Sasha and his pending punishment forgotten. “Hey mister, what are you doing here?”

The man looked over his long, pointed nose. His eyes sparkled a startling green. “What is your name, boy?” he asked.

Jacob considered. He knew better than to talk to a stranger, but something about this man intrigued him. “Jacob,” he answered, “Jacob Miller.”

The man nodded.

"You building a house for yerself?" he asked the boy, pointing a twig-like thumb at the attempt. Jacob nodded, pressing his lips in a disappointed pout. "I can help you with it, if yer want," said the old man. He cocked his head at an odd angle. "Just cost you yer sister."

Jacob's head snapped up. His back stiffened. He said, "What? What are you talking about, mister?"

The senior leaned in and shifted wood and supplies. "See, I can build a nice house fer you. Would you want a doorway pointing to the east to greet the sun when she's a'risin'? And a couple of windows with glass panes to keep the breeze out? A sloped roof like this," He motioned with gnarled hands. "And a small staircase to give you some storage up in a balcony."

Jacob pictured the place there in the glen, a hide-away where he could spend time unsupervised and uninterrupted. With snacks, a sleeping bag, a flashlight, and a lighter, he could live here on his own. He could drink from the brook, too.

"That sounds real nice, mister," Jacob said, brushing some of the drying mud from his palms. "But what do you mean about Sasha?"

The old fellow's face split in a crooked smile. His teeth were decaying and sharp-edged. He stepped closer to Jacob, leaned close to his face. Jacob smelt decay wafting from the odd man's mouth. "I love little girls, Jacob."

The brother crossed whitish arms over his thin chest, his jaw and lips pressed. *Everyone loves Sasha*, he thought.

Head tilted to his side, the elderly fellow considered Jacob. "I can help you. I like young boys, too. And I think I really like you." He smiled again, a wicked, lopsided smirk. He extended his weathered hand in the universal motion of acceptance.

Jacob considered, then extended his own immature hand. The old guy's palm felt rough and dry, like ancient tree bark. Although dirty, Jacob's hand looked stark and white by contrast, like a grub pulled from the ground. They shook a deal, and then Jacob turned to make his way home.

Mother stood in the doorway, glowering, hands on her rounded belly, looming over her son with a frown. "You are in big trouble, little man. What were you thinking? Sasha's too little to walk through the woods on her own!"

Sasha peeked from behind her mother's legs. She stuck her plump, pink tongue out at her brother.

Jacob narrowed his eyes at her. *Pest*, he thought, but aloud he said, "Mom, I'm sorry. She ran away."

Besides, I am too young to babysit that little brat, he thought. "I asked her to stop, but she would not listen to me," he said.

Sasha tugged on the hem of her mother's skirt. "Momma, he throwed a bambber at me."

"I did not!" he directed to Sasha, then turned his attention to his glowering mother, whining, "I was frustrated and threw the hammer, yes, but not at her. It bounced and barely bumped her!"

Mother sighed. She reached a trembling hand to her temple and rubbed, closing her bloodshot eyes.

"Look at her! There isn't even a mark on her. If I threw a hammer at her, there would be a mark."

His mother looked at her boy, placid, then turned and, with long strides, reached the powder room to throw up. Great heaving, sloppy sounds. Sasha stood in the hallway outside, worry written on her small face.

Mother emerged, shaking, wiping her lips with a pink hand towel. Jacob sidled to her. "I'm sorry, Mom."

Mother opened her eyes and managed a watery smile. "I'm just so tired, Jacob. It would be a tremendous help if you and Sasha would get along and play together for a little while so that I can rest."

"Okay, Mom, I got it." His eyelids slid to obscure his baby blues. He swallowed, hard, then said, "Sasha, come with me. I have something that I'm working on in the woods."

Kerry E.B. Black writes from a little house along the bank of a foggy Pennsylvania river. Other published works can be found in "Postcard Poetry and Prose" and "Halloween Forevermore." Please follow the author at

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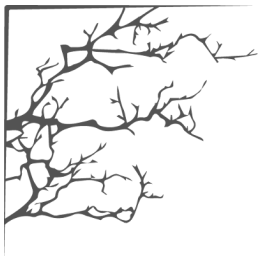

Nova and Ember
Särah Nour

TWO SISTERS NAMED NOVA and Ember lived in a village on the outskirts of a forest they were forbidden to enter, especially on Nos Calan Gaeaf, the night before the first day of winter.

“Beware the Cutty Black Sow,” Mother would tell them. “And the Headless Woman who follows.”

“But she’s just a pig,” Ember would argue. She was a wiry girl with flaming-red hair as wild as she was. “We eat pigs. Why should we be afraid of her?”

“She’s not like other pigs, silly,” Nova said. She wore her snow-white hair in ribbons. “She walks like a person and has no tail.”

“She’s a demon,” Mother said. “She’ll take your soul if you’re not careful.”

“But what about the woman?” Ember asked. “Why does she have no head?”

“No one knows,” Mother said. “Just as no one knows why the Cutty Black Sow takes souls.”

“Don’t worry, Mother. I’ll scare them away with my slingshot.”

Nova laughed. “Slingshots can’t fight off demons. Everyone knows that.”

“Well, what would you do?” Ember demanded.

“I’d run.”

“That’s right, Nova,” Mother said. “Run away. There’s no use fighting them.”

On the night of Nos Calan Gaeaf, the family headed to the village square, which was lit up by the light of the bonfire. Nova wore her best dress, clean and neatly pressed. Ember, who never wore shoes if she could help it, was barefoot and wearing a dress with dirt smudges that Mother couldn’t scrub out. On this night, Mother did not reprimand her or tell her what to wear, for Nos Calan Gaeaf came once a year.

Father joined the rest of the men to gather logs for firewood. Mother said, “Come, children. Let’s find rocks for you both.”

“I’m getting all the biggest ones!” Ember declared.

Mother said, “Only one for each of you. You know the rules.”

Nova and Ember joined the rest of the village children in the search for rocks. As the bonfire grew bigger, the villagers danced, sang, and filled their cups with mead and hot cider. The sweet smell of roasted apples filled the air as the sisters found the ones they wanted. Ember’s rock was jagged, Nova’s smooth as glass.

Nova looked up when she heard bells ringing. “Look, it’s Mari Lwyd!”

The children delighted in seeing the familiar figure: the ghost-white skull of a horse mounted on a wooden pole, adorned with silver bells and colorful ribbons and wrapped in a white sheet. Two men lifted her and shook the pole so the bells chimed as villagers danced in a circle around them.

Mari Lwyd, or the Gray Mare, was meant to bring good fortune for the coming year and scare away spirits who meant them harm. Nova and Ember knew she was just a skull on a pole, but still they looked with wonder at her snapping jaws and her eye sockets filled with glass shards that flashed in the firelight. She was so lifelike, even beautiful.

Mother found the sisters dancing with Mari Lwyd with the rocks in their hands.

“Oh, you found your rocks,” she said. “Here’s your chalk. Remember to share it with the other kids.”

Nova took the chalk and drew a five-pointed star on her rock. Ember then took the chalk and drew a crooked tree.

Once all the children had all marked their rocks, they lined up to throw them into the bonfire. Sparks flew as the rocks vanished into the flames and landed in the crackling wood.

A little boy asked, “Will my rock still be there tomorrow?”

“You’d better hope so,” Ember said. “Or you’ll be dead by next year.”

The boy’s eyes widened in fear. “Is that true?”

“That’s why we do this,” Ember explained. “If your rock is still there in the morning, you’ll live another year. If it’s gone, the Cutty Black Sow will come take your soul.”

The boy ran away from the bonfire and threw his arms around his mother, burying his face in her dress. Ember laughed and joined the rest of

the children in the dancing circle. Near the fire, Ember's hair looked like another flame, while Nova's hair was luminous as a star.

"Nova, Ember," Mother called. "It's time for supper. The potatoes are ready."

The girls joined Mother and Father at the long table with the other villagers. They ate their bread, cheese, and roasted potatoes, then finished with apples dipped in molasses that made their faces sticky. A few men still danced and passed around Mari Lwyd, rattling her bells while some women pulled her ribbons off to put in their hair.

"Mother, Father," Nova said, wiping molasses off her face. "May I have a ribbon too?"

"Yes, dear," Mother said. "Ember, would you like a ribbon?"

"What do I need a ribbon for?" Ember mumbled with her mouth full of apple and her teeth sticking together from the molasses.

Nova went to join the crowd, where she caught a round silver bell that had fallen off Mari Lwyd. It was so shiny that Nova could see the flames reflected in it. She liked the way it chimed when she rolled it in her hands.

"Excuse me, ma'am," she said to a woman she recognized as the miller's wife. "Could you get me a ribbon? I can't reach up there."

"Of course," the miller's wife said. She untied a green ribbon from Mari Lwyd's pole. Nova tied the ribbon to the bell and hung it around her neck. This was better than a hair bow.

As the night went on, Nova and Ember played games and sang songs about the coming winter. Finally Mother and Father took them home. Nova fell asleep wearing the bell necklace, while Ember fell asleep with her face still sticky.

The next morning, Mother and Father took them back to the village square. The bonfire had died out. Mari Lwyd stood in its place, her pole embedded in the earth. Other families were searching the ashes for their rocks to take them home.

"Go find your rocks, girls," Father said. "We'll put them in our cabbage garden."

Nova and Ember reached into the ashes and pulled out the rocks to check the markings on them. There were drawings of the sun and moon, of flowers and leaves, of birds and horses, but try as they might, they could not find any with a star or a tree on them.

"I can't find mine," Nova said.

“Someone took mine too!” Ember said.

Mother gasped and took Ember by the hand while Father took Nova’s hand. They rushed their daughters home.

“Stay inside, all of you,” Father said. “Keep the door locked. Don’t let anyone in.”

After Father left, Mother silently cooked breakfast for Nova and Ember. Her movements were hurried, jittery.

“Where’s Father going?” Ember asked. “When’s he coming back?”

“Don’t worry, darling,” Mother said, spooning porridge into her bowl. “Father will handle everything.”

“Handle what? Is he getting our rocks back?”

“Ember, please, no more questions. Just eat.”

The porridge was finished by the time Father returned. He looked scared, but he said in a calm voice, “Nova, Ember, go to your room. Your mother and I need to talk.”

“Talk about what?” Ember demanded. “What’s happening?”

Nova grabbed her sister’s arm and pulled her into their room. “We can listen in,” she whispered. “Just keep the door open a little.”

Sure enough, they could hear Father saying, “I asked everyone. No one stole the rocks, no one knows what happened to them. They’re gone.”

The sisters couldn’t hear what Mother said, because her voice was soft and she was crying.

“We’ll keep them inside,” Father said. “Until next year. We’ll keep the doors locked and get someone to guard—”

“No, no,” Mother sobbed. “It’s out of our hands.”

“We have to do something,” Father insisted. “Even if their souls are doomed.”

Behind the bedroom door Nova whispered, “The Cutty Black Sow—she’s coming for our souls!”

Ember pulled her slingshot out from under the bed. “She’s not getting them.”

“You fool,” Nova said. “A slingshot won’t do anything.”

“I won’t just sit and wait for her to find us,” Ember said. “If we find her first...”

“We’re going to listen to Mother and Father. We’re staying here.”

Nova sat down on the bed. Her hand went to her necklace. She fiddled with the bell so it chimed.

Ember went to the window. “Did you hear that?”

“That was just my bell,” Nova said.

“No, there was another sound. It came from outside.”

The girls stayed still and listened. Ember said, “Ring it again.”

Nova did. This time she heard another bell chime in response. It sounded far away, like it came from the forest. Nova stood closer to the window and rang the necklace louder. Leaves rustled in the trees as the other bell echoed the sound. Someone was in the forest—someone who had a bell and was calling her with it.

“It’s the Sow,” Nova said. “She’s trying to trick us.”

Ember climbed out the window before Nova could stop her. She ran toward the forest holding her slingshot.

“Ember!” Nova called, but she was already gone. Sighing, Nova climbed out and followed her. Her bell jangled as she ran down the dirt road into the forest. The responding bell grew louder the further she went.

“Ember? Ember!”

“Nova!” came the response. Nova found her sister crouched near a bush, looking at something on the ground.

“Ember, come on. We have to go back. You’re not even wearing shoes!”

“Look what I found!” Ember held up a polished white bone that was longer than her arm.

“Put it down. We’re leaving.”

“And there’s another one!” Ember ran over to a giant tree, where she pulled another bone out from between roots.

“Ember, we’re in danger. We need to go home.”

Ember turned to look at her. “We’re in danger at home too. It doesn’t matter where we go. We’ll have to face the Cutty Black Sow sometime. Maybe these bones will come in handy. We’ll hit her over the head with them.”

“But Mother and Father...” Nova began, but was cut off by the distant neigh of a horse. Ember continued down the dirt road, carrying the bones. Nova reluctantly followed.

“Another bone,” Ember said, picking one up. “They’re all so long.”

“There’s one over here,” Nova said, pointing to one caught in a bramble bush.

The sisters went on until the dirt road disappeared and gave way to tall grass overrun with weeds and thorny plant life.

“Ouch!” Ember exclaimed. “I stepped on something sharp!”

“You should have worn shoes,” Nova sighed.

She untied one of her hair ribbons and wrapped them around Ember’s bleeding heel. It didn’t take long for Ember to step on another thorn, so Nova untied her other ribbon to stop the bleeding. Now loose, Nova’s hair caught on thorns and brambles as they went on.

“I’ll never get these burrs out of my hair,” Nova said mournfully. “I’ll have to cut it.”

“It’s just hair,” Ember said.

They found more bones, like a trail leading them farther into the densest corners of the forest they’d been forbidden to enter. When Ember’s arms became full, Nova started carrying some.

Both were struggling to support the weight of the bones when Nova gasped, “Stop! Look, over there.”

Ember looked. Standing in a clearing not far from them was Mari Lwyd, covered in bells and ribbons and cloaked in white. Her pole was embedded in the ground. Sunlight on her glassy eye sockets made it look like she was looking at them.

“How’d she get out here?” Ember said. “We just saw her in the village.”

“I don’t know.”

A closer look revealed something else different about her: she only had a skull before, but now she had a neck and a rib cage poking through the sheet. They seemed attached to her, but the sisters couldn’t see any rope binding them together.

“Oh, wait,” Nova said, “I know what these bones are for!”

Nova set her bones down in front of Mari Lwyd. Ember set hers down as well. Carefully Nova arranged them on the ground.

“They’re horse legs, see? That’s why they’re so long—”

Suddenly the bones flew off the ground and attached themselves to the pole. Nova let out a scream. With a high-pitched neigh, Mari Lwyd launched herself off the pole and leapt over the girls. Her hooves thundered on the ground as she ran; her bells rang like birdsong. The sheet flew behind her like a cape as she vanished between the trees.

“She’s alive!” Ember shrieked. “She’s real!”

Nova stood speechless, as Ember jumped up and ran in the direction Mari Lwyd disappeared. “She wants us to follow her! She’ll help us find our rocks.”

“Wait...” Nova tried to catch up with her running sister. “We don’t know that. She could be leading us into a trap.”

“She’ll help us! I’m sure....” Ember yelped as she tripped and fell on her face.

Nova caught up just as Ember sat up and reached for the item she tripped over.

“It’s a bone,” she said, not bothering to wipe the dirt off her face or her dress. “She wants us to put her together.”

“You really think she’d help us if we did?” Nova said.

“Of course. She’s Mari Lwyd. We dance with her every year.”

Ember sprang back to her feet as a nearby rustling sound caught her attention. The sisters spotted a black shape moving in the tall grass, disappearing behind a bush.

“The Cutty Black Sow!” Ember exclaimed, pulling out her slingshot.

“Wait, don’t!” Nova stepped forward. “That can’t be the Sow. It’s too small.”

Nova crouched before the bush and held her hand out. A black pig snout poked out, sniffed her hand, then pulled back.

“Nova, get away!” Ember said. She had picked up a rock and was pulling it back in her slingshot.

“I told you, it’s not her.” Nova reached inside the bush and pulled out a tiny black piglet. “See? It’s just a baby. And it’s a boy.”

“But look—he doesn’t have a tail,” Ember said. “He could be hers! Put him down!”

“He must be lost,” Nova said, cradling the piglet in her arms. “Maybe if we return him....”

“She’ll attack us! She’ll think we took him!”

“Ember, maybe she’ll give us back our rocks if we give her something in return. Besides, don’t you think he misses his mommy?”

Ember thought for a moment, then sighed and put her slingshot away. “You’re right. She won’t just hand them over. It’s worth trying.”

Nova and Ember kept walking, following the direction Mari Lwyd had ran. Nova carried the piglet while Ember carried the bones they found. Every so often, Nova would jingle her necklace to see if Mari Lwyd would

answer her. Finally she heard the distant echo of a responding bell, followed by a horse's neigh.

"This way," Nova said. "She's calling us."

Ember followed her into a clearing, where Mari Lwyd was as they found her before: silent, still as a statue, and attached to a new pole that was embedded in the earth.

"Maybe if we give her the bones, she'll come alive again," Ember said. She set the bones down, and Nova set the piglet down so they could arrange them together. There were smaller ones that looked like part of the spine, along with larger ones they believed were hips and shoulders. The piglet sniffed the bones curiously. Nova pulled him into her lap so he wouldn't get in the way.

Once again the bones attached themselves to the pole and Mari Lwyd sprang out of the ground. The piglet squealed in fright. Nova held him close and stroked his back to comfort him.

But this time Mari Lwyd didn't gallop away. She looked at the sisters, shook her head so the bells jangled, and then started trotting. Nova and Ember followed her.

"She looks like she has most of her bones now," Nova said.

"I can't tell," Ember said. "She's still wearing the sheet. Maybe the sheet is keeping all her bones together."

The sunlight faded and the sky darkened. The moon emerged from behind the clouds. Mari Lwyd trotted faster, so the girls sped up. Suddenly she let out a panicked whinny and bolted through the trees.

"Mari Lwyd!" Ember called. "Come back!"

"She's scared," Nova said. "Something frightened her."

The sisters took in their surroundings. Nova held the piglet protectively while Ember aimed her slingshot at the shadows between the trees, expecting a demon to spring out at any moment.

They heard what sounded like wind, but there was no wind blowing through the trees. The sound became more high-pitched, like air blowing through a rusted whistle, then faded lower until it sounded like heavy breathing.

"Who's there?" Ember said. "Come on out. We're not afraid of you."

There was movement in the trees. A shadowy figure slowly emerged. Ember stood with her slingshot ready, but stepped back in horror once the figure stepped into the moonlight.

She wore a black robe, with long sleeves concealing the hands clasped in front of her. A hood draped over the space between her shoulders, and there was a mound of empty cloth where her head should have been. With every breath the hood rose slightly, then went limp again when the air escaped.

Ember's hands were shaking too hard to fire her slingshot. She couldn't speak or cry out or move away, only stare wide-eyed at the ghastly creature.

Seeing her sister paralyzed in fear, Nova cleared her throat, held up the piglet and said, "Headless Woman, if you may, please take us to the Cutty Black Sow. We have something that belongs to her."

The Headless Woman emitted a long, wailing sigh, or perhaps she was humming. She turned and walked slowly, as though dragging her feet. Nova and Ember followed her, keeping their distance.

Finally, once they emerged from the forest on the other side, the deep, dark mouth of a cave gaped before them. The Headless Woman stopped, turned to the sisters, and extended her arm to escort them in.

A flickering light lit up the cave. The sisters walked toward it and came to a fire which surrounded piles upon piles of rocks, all with children's drawings on them. There must have been hundreds of them. Nova and Ember stared in horror. How were they supposed to find theirs?

Ember saw a long flash of white on the cave floor. She picked up a bone. It looked like the rest of Mari Lwyd's spine.

The piglet squirmed in Nova's arms, so she set him down. He trotted happily past the rocks and the fire, as if he knew exactly where he was going. Nova followed him, and Ember followed Nova. The Headless Woman followed them.

Behind the rock piles were other piglets. They were nursing as their enormous mother lay on the cave floor. The lost piglet joined his siblings, and the mother stirred, pulling away from her hungry children to stand on her hind legs.

The Cutty Black Sow faced Nova and Ember. She was massive, menacing. Her eyes glowed blood-red in the firelight. She didn't gaze upon them as an animal would. Her eyes were sharp, clear, knowing. She knew what they came for.

The Sow looked past the sisters and nodded at the Headless Woman. The Headless Woman pointed at the rocks. She made that odd whistling

sound again, only this time a single word echoed off the cave walls.

"*One*," she sighed. "*One... One...One....*"

Nova swallowed her fear. "So..." she asked in a shaking voice, "we have to search?"

The Cutty Black Sow narrowed her eyes and nodded.

Ember set the bone down before joining Nova in looking through the rocks. They held them to the firelight to see the chalk markings. They climbed the piles to look at the ones on the top. They even began to sweat as the search wore them down and their closeness to the fire made the cave feel hot and stuffy.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Ember ran to Nova and shoved a smooth rock into her hands.

"Nova, I found yours! Take it! Go!"

"What...? Ember, no," Nova said. "I can't leave you here."

"You heard the Headless Woman. Only one of us is getting out."

"So let's find yours. I'll stay."

"Nova, please. Just go. If you hurry you'll be home by morning. Mother could get the burrs out of your hair. You won't have to cut it."

"But...." Nova felt tears in her eyes. There had to be another way. Her hands went to her necklace. She didn't know if it would work, but she had to try. She shook the bell hard, its chime echoing all throughout the cave.

Instantly the sounds came: the thundering hooves, the clanging of bells, the high whinny of a skeletal horse.

Mari Lwyd bounded through the cave and halted in front of Nova and Ember. The backbone on the ground flew up and attached itself to her. Before their eyes she transformed. Gray fur grew over her bones; eyeballs filled her eye sockets; the cloak turned into a long white mane and tail.

The Cutty Black Sow let out an enraged squeal as she leapt at Ember, knocking her to the ground. The slingshot flew out of Ember's pocket and landed near the fire. The Sow pinned her down with her hooves and bared her sharp white teeth.

Nova ran to retrieve the slingshot. Just as the Sow was about to bite down on Ember's face, Nova placed her rock in the slingshot, pulled it back, and fired.

The rock struck the Sow's head, knocking her off Ember. Just then, Mari Lwyd kicked a jagged rock in Nova's direction. Nova caught it and saw that it was Ember's. She could tell by the crooked tree.

Ember leapt up and grabbed Nova's rock as the Cutty Black Sow rose to her feet. The sisters ran to Mari Lwyd and climbed onto her back. The Headless Woman stepped aside and the horse galloped past her as the Sow's furious squealed faded in the cave's echo.

Once they were out of the cave, Mari Lwyd slowed down and took her time carrying the girls through the forest. Ember looked back to make sure the Sow wasn't following them.

"It's not Calan Gaeaf anymore," Nova told her. "The Sow can't leave her cave for another year."

"The Headless Woman," Ember said. "She let us go. Why?"

"I guess she just works for the Sow. She doesn't take souls herself." Nova yawned and leaned against the horse's soft mane. "Thank you, Mari Lwyd."

"Thank you so much, Mari Lwyd," Ember said, realizing she was sleepy too. "We couldn't have made it without you."

Nova closed her eyes. "And you, Ember. I couldn't have made it without you."

Ember yawned. "You... how'd you know how to fire a slingshot?"

"I've seen you do it...." Nova fell asleep before she could say more. Ember rested her head against her sister's back and fell asleep too.

Nova and Ember slept the rest of the way home, only waking up when Mari Lwyd bowed down and gently dropped them on the ground outside their home. Rubbing their eyes, the sisters watched the Gray Mare disappear once again into the forest. They stood up and, clasping a rock in one hand and their sisters' hand in the other, went inside to greet Mother and Father.

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Fargo's art community inspires her every day with its commitment to diversity and its support for modest local businesses.

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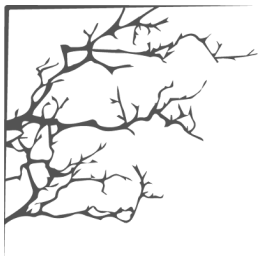

INHERITANCE
Melanie Noell Bernard

INSOMNIA. WHAT A BIT....

I rolled over in the musty four-poster bed for the sixth time... or was it the seventh? Honestly, I'd lost count. Just like I'd lost count of those stupid sheep that're supposed to help me fall asleep. I gave up on them somewhere after three hundred, and that was after I'd already 'emptied my mind' and practiced some deep breathing exercises. Those fluffy, baaing, white sheep were a last resort. And they weren't helping. Not tonight.

No doubt this had something to do with the incessant ticking coming from somewhere within the depths of this enormous place. I arrived around mid-day and expected to spend maybe a few hours looking around. Boy, was I wrong. The house left to me by inheritance was not a house by any definition of the word I knew. It was a beast.

High in the hills, it sat back miles from civilization. The house had over 15 bedrooms, two kitchens, five sitting rooms, three dining rooms, a sprawling veranda out the back, and that was just the main house. There was a second house a short walk away and supposedly two more scattered across the endless grounds of the estate. It wasn't going to take me a few hours to check out what my relative had left me. It was going to take weeks. And I didn't want to be here.

Tick.

Again, I turned over, flinging my arms over the edge of the bed to swat away the noise.

Tick.

My eyes snapped open and latched onto the sliver of moonlight pouring in through the window. The old glass warped the beam until it cracked and fractured across the wooden floor, creating a pattern that my hyper-alert brain was all too keen to piece together like some puzzle. When the unmoving light shards morphed into nymphs dancing to the beat of the ticking, however, I got up.

The bed groaned underneath me. The cool night air whispered against my skin as the sheets slipped away, leaving me exposed to the chill that had been creeping up my spine since the driver left me alone. I knew I was being silly. This was just an old house. Sure, in disrepair and creepy as all get out, especially given its age, but it was still an inanimate object with no more capability of attacking me than a tree. Not that you'd know it from the way my family spoke of the place.

I didn't know much about the estate or about my long-dead relative. My family hadn't talked about her, despite her having left us this giant chunk of land. The only way to glean any information was to offer copious amounts of alcohol in exchange. But then it'd been impossible to tell how much of the family legend was true and how much of it was just extravagant exaggerations brewed up to embroider the family history.

Rumor was the native peoples kidnapped her. Another said she'd gone mad and drowned herself in the river, her body washed out to sea. And the more romantic ones said she fled in the night with a lover, but no one really knew. No one could truly say what had happened to my great-great-great-grandmother. All we knew was that, after her death, no one set foot in her estate. It sat empty for generations, untouched and uncared for until it fell into such disrepair the city officials wanted it condemned, but they needed family permission. And I was the only surviving relative.

Tick.

Ugh. I tipped my head down and dug my fingers into my unruly, greasy hair. I clawed at the strands and tried to tear them from my scalp like that might cease the sound. Pain spiked at my roots like needles jabbing into my skull.

Tick.

Sitting there in that drafty, creaking, decrepit house, I wondered why I hadn't just signed it over when I met the city officials in town that afternoon. From the outside, the roof looked ready to cave in. The stairs were most definitely a death-trap, one I hadn't tempted yet and may never tempt given I didn't have a death wish. The glass on the windows was so old I couldn't see a thing out of them, even after I attempted cleaning one. The layers of dust and grime were enough to give a healthy person asthma. I had cringed merely at the thought of having to sleep in that bed, but I didn't have a choice. The rest of the house was too bloody cold and,

despite the numerous hearths, I couldn't find a single log of wood to build a fire.

No. This place had nothing going for it. I wouldn't even say it had character because it didn't. It was just a crumbling heap of antique furniture, mold, and bad ghost stories held up by sagging, rotting support beams. If anything, it was what carnivals modeled haunted houses after.

Tick.

Complete with its own blasted sound effects!

"Agh!" I ripped my hands from my head, dragging a few strands of hair with them. The hairs fell away one by one as my hands shook from a mixture of aggravation and lack of sleep.

If my great-great-great-grandmother had to listen to this damned ticking all the time, I wouldn't have been the least bit surprised she killed herself. It'd be enough to make *anyone* want a little peace and quiet—by any means necessary—but where the hell was it coming from?

Climbing from the bed, my bare feet smearing the thick layers of grime coating the worn wooden floor, I managed to light the candle sitting on the nightstand. The tiny flame flickered to life, but it offered less light than the slashes of moonlight decorating the floor. Still, it was all I had in a house with no electricity and no plumbing. Boy, was I going to be happy to return to civilization in the morning. No way was I spending another night there, not with the ticking, not without a toilet, and certainly not without a hot shower after freezing all night.

My fingers wrapped around the tarnished candle-holder. I carried the dim light with me as I headed for the door on the other side of the enormous room, the floorboards groaning and wailing underneath my bare feet. The door wasn't much better. It protested with a bone-chilling creak as I eased it open and peered into the complete and utter blackness that was the hallway. Just the sight of it set my heart into a flurry.

It wasn't the darkness, per se, that scared me. Rather what could be lingering in the abyss, and I don't mean ghosts. Ghosts were for children and people who were spiritual. No, I worried about the real dangers: people. After all, that house had been abandoned for decades, if not a century by now. Who knew what gangs, druggies, or other dangerous people could have found their way inside and decided to stay?

I swallowed. My eyes flicked back and forth like I might catch a glimpse of whatever lurked in the shadows and slam the door in its face,

but nothing came. I was being silly. There was no one in this house but me. There was no one within 20 miles of this place at least, and I wasn't afraid of the dark.

Curling my fingers into a fist and forcing away the shudder of my spine, I urged myself into the hall. The darkness swallowed my candle. It gobbled it up like it was nothing more than an unwanted firefly buzzing inside the house and, even though the flame flickered a few inches above my hand, it was as useful as a flashlight without batteries. Still, I clung to it. It did nothing, but it seemed foolish to leave it behind.

My free hand found the wall to my left. I let my fingers trail along the cracked paint despite the jagged edges and dirt skimming along underneath them. It was the only way to really know where I was going.

Tick. The wall pulsed.

I yanked my hand away. My blood ran cold. My eyes widened like I had night vision and could activate it, but I didn't. I couldn't see any better in a panic than I could angry, but I didn't move.

Tick.

I jumped, expecting something to lunge out at me. To grab me.

Tick.

I held my breath, trying to quiet my fear. *Walls don't pulse.*

Tick.

My whole body twitched at the sound, but nothing else happened. I was alone. The wall hadn't moved. *I imagined it. Yeah. Brains do things like that when they lose a sense.*

Tick.

I ground my teeth together. *Stupid brain*. I chastised myself, but every muscle in my body coiled. I couldn't help it. I was tired, anxious, on edge, but I extended my hand once more. With all the caution of a frightened deer during hunting season, I brushed the wall.

Tick.

Nothing happened. I forced my shoulders to settle. I shook my head, admonishing myself for being so foolish and jumpy, and continued my search for the cause of my rattled nerves. The wall and that infuriating ticking, which hadn't stopped since night fell, acted as my guide.

I followed them back into the main foyer where moonlight greeted me once more. It rained down on me through the large glass panes that nestled along the backside of the staircase landing. Though filthy, the marble floor

mirrored the light until the entire room glistened in a pale silver glow. Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better. Neither did the way the ticking echoed like the whole house was infected, liked the ticking was a plague that had consumed every last inch. And I was next. It was soft and quiet, but it rattled within me like my chest was just an empty cavity offering it room and board whether I wanted it to take up residence or not. To evict it, I'd have to make it stop. After all, it was probably just a door or a window or some old contraption I didn't even have a name for and, if I couldn't figure out how to make it stop, I would destroy it. Anything to cease that ticking.

Even if that meant climbing that rickety, crumbling staircase because the ticking definitely emanated from above.

Inhaling deep enough to fill my lungs, I exhaled and set my free hand against the railing. It, too, was filthy. Dust swept into the air as my hand slid along the smooth wood. My feet eased onto each step, testing its strength before settling my weight onto it. Every step greeted my body with a moan of protest like it would throw me back down to the main floor if only it had the strength left after all these years.

But the next step sounded different. It met me with splintering cracks before wood gave way beneath me. My body plummeted. The sudden jerk launched the candle through the air. My other hand squeezed the railing, abruptly halting my descent with a snap of pain that shuddered down my arm and into my back. Yet, it held. At least until my other hand found a baluster and I started clawing my way out of the gaping hole that was a staircase just moments ago.

I swung my legs up, my feet scrabbling for a hold. They bashed against splintered wood. Jagged edges dug into the soft bottoms of my feet like sharpened claws, tearing through flesh. Slick blood trickled from the gashes. My feet slipped. I dropped back onto my arms. I bit my cheek against the agonized screams of my muscles and hauled myself up again. This time my feet cleared the hole, but sparks of pain shot through my soles like I stood on glass, causing me to lean forward.

Bent over the railing, I stared down at the marble floor below. My fingers clung to the sturdy wood beneath me. My chest heaved as adrenaline ravaged my veins like a wildfire, and my toes just barely touched the staircase, afraid they might vanish into darkness once more. But the ticking continued.

And I had to, as well.

I either sat in the foyer all night, awake, frozen, and unable to sleep because of the ticking, or I found the blasted ticking and smashed it into a billion pieces to make this death-defying stunt worth it. As much as I wanted to go back down, I didn't. If I didn't sleep, I'd be beyond irritable in the morning. And curiosity was my biggest weakness. That was what *really* drove me up into the belly of this beast of a house.

Once more, I ascended. This time on aching, bloody feet and without the candle. The candle had fallen back to the main floor, clattering against marble with a horrid metallic clang. Thankfully, its flight through the air must've put it out because the house wasn't on fire, and now I had two hands with which to clutch the railing.

At the landing, I slipped across the open space to the giant windows, my feet barely leaving the ground like that might appease the floor and keep it from betraying me again. Maybe it worked because nothing happened. I looked out through the windows, the glass not nearly as foggy or warped as some of the other rooms. I could even make out the veranda. I could see where flower patches used to be, now overgrown and spotted with death. A couple statues poked out from under the ivy reclaiming them. A pond was no longer blue, but green and mossy from where algae had swept across it like a plague. Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about how gorgeous this place could be if only someone had taken care of it.

Too bad I was not that person.

Ascending the last flight of stairs, I made it to the second floor and knew I headed in the right direction. The ticking had grown louder. It stretched my nerves until they were tight as piano strings. Each tick plunked the hammer down upon them, threatening to snap them with the bang of a gunshot. I had to remove the hammer before I went off.

No longer deterred by my lack of candlelight, not that it did much to begin with, I stormed down the hall on feet slick with blood. The last twinkle of moonlight faded, allowing darkness to engulf me once more. But I didn't care. The tick was all the guidance I needed.

It drew me down one hallway after the next until it berated my ears like the bass drum at a rock concert. It deafened me to even the stomps of my own feet and the pounding of my own heart. It thumped in my chest, setting up furniture and painting the walls like it owned the damned place, but I was gonna show it who the landlord was.

The door at the end of the hall drew nearer. I could just make it out because moonlight crept out from underneath like a white, toxic ooze. My hand extended. I latched onto the knob, twisted it, and threw the door open. It banged against the inner wall, announcing my entrance as I tore into the room like a windstorm.

And I stopped short.

My feet skidded to a halt. My eyes widened. My breath caught, and I could do nothing more than stare.

This room was much brighter than the others I'd investigated. The window was smashed. Moonlight flooded the small space, illuminating every corner like it was the middle of the day. It gave light to the upturned writing desk, the broken chairs, the remnants of what was possibly a dress at one point. It also gave light to her.

Across the room, a woman hunched on a stool. Her back was rounded like she'd sat there her whole life. A cloak was pulled tight around her shoulders and the hood draping over her head hid her face. Tufts of gray hair poked out from beneath the heavy fabric. Her fingers, gnarled and wrinkled, pulled on wool, thinning it out before allowing the spinning wheel to take it from her and spin it into yarn. Each time the wheel spun, it ticked.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I was so confused that I wasn't sure what to do. At first, I just stared at her. Watched as her foot tapped up and down, making the wheel spin round and round. She never once looked up. She never even acknowledged my presence or the bang of the door or any of it. It was like... I wasn't there. Or maybe she wasn't.

No. I don't believe in ghosts.

But then what was she doing there in that house so far from nowhere?

Inching forward, the floorboards creaked beneath me. Despite the loudness of the ticking earlier, it was quiet here and the startling sound of the floor halted me. My fists clenched, ready to defend myself, but the woman didn't move. Even if she had reacted, it wouldn't have mattered. From what I could see, she looked ancient. She wouldn't put up much of a fight, but then how had she made it all the way out there? No one said

anything about a caretaker, and no one lived in this house. No one lived for miles around.

Who was she?

I pooled my courage. Well... my curiosity pooled my courage. It drew me closer to the woman, but no matter how much the floor creaked or groaned, she didn't react. She just kept spinning.

"Hello?" I finally ventured.

Nothing.

Perhaps she was deaf. That would explain why the ticking wheel didn't drive her up the bloody wall, but it didn't explain why she was spinning yarn in the middle of the night. It didn't explain what she was doing in this abandoned house.

Another step closer and light glinted off metal. Metal wrapped around her ankles. From her ankle, the metal snaked out across the floor to twist around the spinning wheel, attaching human to object. *She's chained here?! Who the Hell would do such a thing?!*

I surged forward. My hand rested on her shoulder, trying to get her attention without startling her. The instant I touched her, she halted. Everything stopped. Her foot, her fingers, the wheel, the ticking.

Her head snapped up. Her eyes, pale as the moonlight pouring in around her, locked onto me. They widened with shock, with surprise, like she hadn't seen a person in longer than she could remember. *How long has she been here?*

"Ma'am," I murmured, softening my expression by pulling my eyebrows together and offering her a gentle smile. "It's going to be okay. I'm going to get you out of here."

She didn't smile back. Her expression didn't even shift as I spoke, but it didn't matter. She was probably just in shock. She was probably hungry and tired. How long had she been here? How had she survived?

I eased down, ready to crouch and remove the shackles when her hand thrust forward. Her fingers wrapped around my wrist in a death grip, stronger than a woman her age should be capable of.

My eyes widened. My heart picked up its tempo once more and my eyes returned to hers. "Wha...."

A vicious smile curled her cracked lips. Jagged, yellowed teeth peeked out from her mouth. Her eyes widened, but not with surprise. No. Now

they widened with sick, twisted glee. “Finally,” she croaked, her voice hoarse like she hadn’t used it in years, or ever.

“Ma’am,” I gasped, too shocked to find any other words.

She shoved my hand down against the metal shackle encasing her ankle. The dull gray lightened in color until it glowed the same silver of the moon, but it burned my skin with the blazing heat of melted iron. It seared my flesh. I screamed. I tried to yank away, to throw off the old woman, but she was too strong. She kept me pinned while the metal blazed through my wrist. First the top layer of skin, then the layer under that. It sawed through nerves and tendons, bone and muscle until it felt as though my hand had been cleaved from my body.

My eyes pinched closed. Tears streamed down my cheeks. They dug red lines toward my chin until they dripped to the floor. My throat ached from my wailing. My lungs felt ready to burst with the need to expel more screams when it suddenly stopped.

There was no pain. No agony. No burn. The relief was so abrupt that my screams cut right off and my eyes opened. I was in the house, sitting on a wooden stool in a dark room splattered with moonlight, and a wicked chuckle filled the chilled air.

“Foolish girl.”

Next to me, but just out of reach, stood a woman. Her hair was sleek and black, but the moonlight painted it silver, the same color as her eyes. Her cheeks were pale, but full and healthy. Her chin came to a delicate point, and her lips pulled into the same vicious smile the old woman had given me. She bent at the waist and leaned forward. Her gaze bore into me like she could see into my soul. Maybe she could because I shuddered.

I tried to pull away from her, but I couldn’t. My wrist was caught. I tugged again. The clinking metal drew my attention to the shackle wrapped around it, trapping me to the spinning wheel. My heart stopped. *I’m trapped?*

“So,” the woman exhaled.

I lifted my head.

“This is what my bloodline has come to.” Her round eyes narrowed in scrutiny, and disdain curled her lips. “What a pity.”

“Who are you?!” I demanded, still yanking on the chain.

The woman righted herself, her posture impeccable and graceful. She drew a smirk across her face. “Why, dear,” she began, her tone

condescending. “Don’t you recognize your own- Hmm... Would it be great-grandmother?”

I blinked, too shocked to respond. I’d seen her picture. Once. Right before I came here to check out this blasted place, but there was no denying it. This tall, elegant woman standing before me was my great-great-great-grandmother, but...“You disappeared.”

Another deep, malicious chuckle spilled from her dainty lips. “Yes, well, that tends to happen when you’re trapped in a curse.”

“A curse?”

With long, thin fingers, she gestured to the spinning wheel. “More of a punishment, I should say,” she clarified with the tiniest of shrugs. “But, oh well. No matter. I’m free now.” She practically trembled with excitement as she spun, her long skirts brushing against the floor as she headed for the door.

“Wait!” I jumped to the end of my chain, trying to stop her. “You can’t just leave me here!”

She looked at me over her shoulder, her silver eyes scathing up and down my body. Her top lip curled in disgust. “Actually, dear, I can, and well... I think I ought to.” Another dark smile tugged the sneer away, and she gave me a tiny flick of her fingers as she swept into the hall. “Have fun in eternity, dear!”

Melanie Noell Bernard is a graduate student who explores the blueprint for life: genes. Her scientific background is the inspiration for many of her stories. When she’s not honing her writing craft or researching in the lab, she’s reviewing books and hosting literary discussions on her blog, MNBernard Books.

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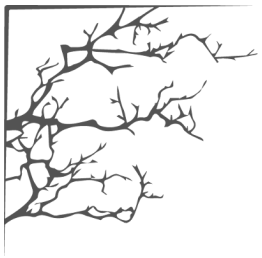

Twice-Made Vows
T.S. Dickerson

ONCE UPON A TIME, A marriage treaty united the kingdoms of Montesin and Samine. The bride, Princess Elaine, and groom, Prince Giles, stumbled up the aisle into a stray miracle and were blessed to love the person chosen for them. For eleven glorious months, they adored each other thoroughly.

Then, an illness swept through the kingdom, claiming the King, the Queen, and the Princess. In the timespan of a death rattle, the prince was spared and cursed. Now, he would inherit the kingdom before his time. To do so, he would have to remarry, for no Montesin King could stand without a Queen.

His visited the grave of his beloved to beg forgiveness. Kneeling before her headstone, he let out a wretched cry. Thousands of people in his kingdom and a million or more in the world beyond, but he would always be alone without her. In that moment, he knew that loneliness was a fate he could not bear.

ϕϕϕ

“Once more, sire, I beg you not to do this.”

Prince Giles Montesin sighed and looked away from the lovely woman across the ballroom floor to meet the priest’s gaze.

“Once more, Father Draval, I’ll remind you that I have no choice.” He spoke softly but did not whisper, and he straightened his posture as he added, “And I assure you, if I have to tell you again, I’ll have your head.”

Father Draval leaned away from the young man to better study the profile of a face he’d watched grow from childhood. He took a deep breath, clenched his jaw, and placed a hand lightly on the Prince’s forearm.

“Prince Giles, I have begged you in the name of all holy things. I have begged you in the name of the innocent young woman in the prime of her life.” At this the priest gestured toward the woman the prince had been

staring at. She was dancing now, her pink skirts and blonde hair swirling around her, her beauty making her partner all but invisible in comparison.

"I have even invoked the names of your parents, and the purity of your own heart," Draval continued. He felt Prince Giles's muscles tensing beneath his hand, saw his knuckles whitening as his grip on his champagne glass tightened. Still, the priest did not let go. "Now, I invoke the one name I've saved back in the hope that you would see sense again beyond your grief over her." The prince jerked his arm away from the older man, his drink sloshing out upon the floor.

Talk ceased in their part of the room as people stared, openly or covertly. A few dancers stopped their movements, though the band continued to play and chatter was heard from other parts of the room. A servant bustled over and bent to clear away the mess on the floor and another arrived with a tray of fresh drinks.

"Thank you," the prince said to the first. He set his empty glass upon the tray and waved away the server who had offered it. He spun on his heel and seized Draval's arm in his hand, pinching it in his grip as he directed the man into the shadowed hall outside the ballroom. He shoved the priest into the darkness.

Draval stumbled a step or two. Once his vision adjusted to the low light, he gazed into the prince's face as he rubbed at his bruised arm.

"I will *not* give up on her," said the prince. "She would never give up on me." The pain in the prince's eyes was familiar, but the fiery mania that burned was a new feature.

"Elaine would not want this." The priest flinched as the prince raised his arm, his face contorting in rage. He slammed the back of his hand across Draval's cheek and Draval whirled away and went down to one knee, tears filling his eyes as his cheek burned and his heart pounded.

The prince moved to stand facing the wall, bracing his arms upon it. He took a shaking breath, then stood and straightened his clothes and offered Draval his hand.

"I'm sorry, priest," he said. The older man took the prince's arm and let himself be hauled to his feet. Giles stepped forward and placed his hands on Draval's shoulders. "I *am* sorry, old friend."

They stood without speaking for a moment, measuring each other's breath against the beat of the music and the waves of laughter from the

ballroom. Draval wanted to bring Giles back into the light, wanted to see him laugh and dance again.

“I’ve hardly been able to breathe since she died, priest. I’ve hardly been able to think. There’s a haze over everything.” The prince swallowed and a single tear slid down his cheek. “I’m going to bring her back.”

ϕϕϕ

“Mother?” Cecilia raised her veil to better see her mother’s face. Leela was flushed. “Are you well, Mother?”

“No, dear. I am more than well.” She wiped a tear and embraced her daughter. “My daughter; a queen.”

Cecilia’s stomach flipped over and she trembled in her mother’s arms.

“Now, now, how are you?” Leela asked, stepping away to look at Cecilia’s pale face. “It’s all happened so quickly. Are you alright? Are you feeling sure?”

“Mother,” Cecilia scoffed and turned to look in her mirror again. She ran her hands down her sides, tracing her curves. “Of course I’m sure. He’s like Prince Charming in a fairy tale; handsome, kind. And he loved Princess Elaine so well, I’m sure he’ll treat me nicely.”

Her mother nodded and bent to spread out the train of the dress. “I only meant it caught us by surprise... his asking at the ball. And his hurry to have the wedding. I just haven’t had as much time as I’d like to prepare you.”

Now Cecilia flushed. “For the wedding night?” she asked. “Or for being a wife? Because you’ve covered both in plenty of detail,” she assured her mother hastily, not wanting to repeat the embarrassing discussion of her ‘womanly duties.’

Her mother had moved to the window and stood looking out. “No. I wanted to discuss what it might mean to be the second wife—what it might be like to marry a widower. Some things might be difficult.”

Cecilia saw her own expression change in the mirror but felt separate from it, lost in her thoughts. The face in front of her, with lips turning downward and a crease of worry on its brow, seemed like someone else’s. For a moment, she was a visitor in her own body as she recalled Princess Elaine with her lovely straight, dark hair and beautiful figure. With her kind smile and warm eyes, her hand always curved around the prince’s arm.

Against her will, Cecilia saw a flash of them together in a bedroom painted red. There was a four-post bed of ebony wood, with a gold inlay of a tree with falling leaves, the kingdom's symbol, on the foot. The bed rocked as Giles grasped Elaine's hips in his large hands and held her steady, driving deep inside her. She dug her fingers into the flesh of his shoulders and cried out in pleasure, repeating his name. A ruby pendant slid along her skin to disappear into her hair and the bed clothes, the chain tightening about her throat.

Cecilia shook her head and stepped back from the mirror. Slowly, the images cleared away.

"Do you think he'll always think of her? Always compare us?" she asked.

"Oh, Cecilia, no," her mother said, rushing over and brushing a strand of hair away from her daughter's eyes. "We know he loved her very much. He waited nearly two years to remarry and was rarely seen in society for much of that time. We know the rumors that circulated after her death... about how he'd changed, how he was crazed and unfit to rule. But we also know that's not true."

"No, he is wonderful to me," Cecilia confirmed. "A perfect gentleman." She began to pull the pins from her hair, releasing the veil. She needed to sleep soon. Tomorrow was the wedding. But she had one more concern to share with her mother.

"He hasn't said he loves me, though," she said quietly. "He tells me how beautiful I am, how kind. He even said once that I was like her; like Elaine. But he's never said he loves me."

"That's what I wanted to say to you, Cecilia." Her mother smiled, a picture of care and understanding. Cecilia inked the image on her memory, hoping to one day look that way to her own children. "Love will come, dear. It may take a little time to replace some of his memories of Princess Elaine, but really, he had less than a year with her. You two will have a lifetime."

"What is it that the poet said?" Cecilia asked, feeling apart from her body again. "'True love of an instant can wash away a lifetime of logic.' Something like that..."

"Nonsense," her mother answered, helping her pull the rest of the pins. "We know he's logical. He chose you."

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Cecilia had never been so happy. The wedding had been a blur of terror. She'd gotten used to the public eye while Giles had courted her, but the intensity of all those people and all that focus would have been too much to bear, had he not held her hand and smiled at her throughout.

They had eaten and drunk, nodded as their subjects bowed low before them, and danced. Now, they were retiring from the banquet hall to the sounds of cheers and clapping.

Once the doors shut behind them, Giles bent and placed a soft kiss upon her cheek. "One moment, my dear. I must make a final check regarding the crowning ceremony tomorrow." He stepped away and spoke hastily to a servant dressed in finery grander than anything her family owned. She reached down and smoothed her gown, thinking of her undergarments. Had Elaine worn silk or satin? Had she worn white lace?

The prince, her husband, interrupted her train of thought by offering her his arm. She took it and he led her toward the stairs.

"We are not to be disturbed," he said to the servant. His voice was sterner than she'd ever heard it. "Remember. Absolutely no one enters this wing until we leave it in the morning." The servant confirmed the order.

As they began to climb the stairs, Giles was silent, and Cecilia's chest filled with a chilly dread. His tone had been so odd. And to keep servants away from the entire wing all night? It seemed excessive. What if she needed something? What if she needed to speak to someone? What if she panicked and....

Her thoughts were cut off as another flash of images filled her mind. Princess Elaine was bent forward over the four-post bed, gripping white bedclothes as Giles moved behind her. Then, another flash and Elaine was dancing naked, her body stunning against the red walls of the bedroom Cecilia had pictured before.

Then, most disturbing of all and more vivid than all the previous flashes, Cecilia saw Giles sitting beside a window seat, his head tilted to rest against Elaine's knee. And Cecilia saw this as though through Elaine's eyes. She felt herself looking down at him and running her fingers through his silken hair.

"There is nothing," Giles said, "in any imaginable reality that can overcome my love for you. Not time, not death; nothing. There will never be anything better than this and there will never be anyone else."

“Giles,” The voice mingled with Cecilia’s own voice in her head; her higher pitch intertwining with Elaine’s alto tones. “You’ve been reading too much poetry.”

The prince laughed, something Cecilia realized she had never heard him do. “No poetry at all, my love. Grimoires.”

Now, Elaine laughed. “Ah, you’ve been in the priest’s study again.”

“Yes, and do you know what I found?” Giles asked, rising onto his hands and knees. He placed a hand on Elaine’s ankle and slowly began to trail his fingers up her calf. Cecilia shivered as she felt the phantom trace of skin against skin, first across her knee, then up her inner thigh. She felt a wash of heat between her legs and felt ashamed, as if she’d walked in on a couple and gotten pleasure from it before she could turn and leave.

Her vision darkened around the edges and she stumbled a bit as she heard Giles’s voice as if at a distance. “I found a love spell guaranteed to make a woman...”

“Cecilia, are you alright?” came Giles’s voice, louder and vastly different in tone. Her vision came back in full color and she blinked a few times. Giles cupped her cheek in his hand and his touch was so familiar she started. He pulled his hand away.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, reaching for a door handle. Cecilia looked around in surprise. They’d come to the end of a hall and stood before a pair of double doors. They’d made it to the bedroom already.

She swallowed the cotton in her throat and offered a weak smile. “A little, I suppose.”

Giles put his hand back to her cheek. When she didn’t flinch or pull away, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss started out chaste, just as their kiss at the wedding altar had been, but it intensified. Cecilia found herself wrapped in his arms, head bent back as he spread her lips with his own and plunged his tongue into her mouth. Soon, he lifted her and carried her through the door, kicking it shut behind him.

He moaned and moved his lips to her neck and as she caught her breath, she heard him whisper, “Elaine.”

She let out a gasp and pushed at his shoulders, squirming slightly in his grasp. “Giles, that’s not my name.” She felt her muscles tensing and trembling, a chill solidifying in her gut. She saw red, and for a moment thought it was the sudden terror, fooling with her mind. Then, she realized it was the walls. The walls were painted red.

Giles let out a sigh and tossed her away from him. Cecilia screeched and flailed in midair, her legs tangling in the train of her dress. In a blink, she landed on a soft surface. She scrambled to sit upright and her shoulder cracked against a hard black post.

"No," she said, tears coming to her eyes. It was the room from her vision. She looked for the window seat, but the curtains were drawn across it and before it sat a wooden table piled with books, stoppered vials, and instruments. "No, no, what's...? No."

Prince Giles walked past the foot of the bed, removing his coat. Cecilia backed away from him, feet scrabbling in the white bedding, her dress tearing. Her back struck the wall behind the bed and something jingled to her left. She turned and saw a ruby pendant hanging from the post. She recognized it. The whole kingdom would. Elaine had worn it every day. Elaine had been *buried* wearing it.

Even as the memory crossed her mind, Cecilia's gaze fell on the casket. It lay parallel to the opposite side of the bed. She leaped away from it and would have fallen from the bed, but hands caught her and gently pushed her back toward the center.

"Shh, easy now." Cecilia whirled to look into the aged face of Father Draval, the prince's most trusted advisor and near-constant companion since the death of Elaine. He had chaperoned their outings many times. "It will be better for you if you don't panic, dear."

"What?" she asked. His sympathetic expression infuriated her. She looked to Giles. "What will be better?"

"You mustn't be scared," he said, climbing onto the bed from the foot. He crawled toward her and she trembled, fighting the urge to run. There must be an explanation. This was her husband, her prince. Maybe there was some ritual she didn't know about—to consummate the marriage. Her heart sunk despite her hopeful thoughts as Giles took her clammy hand between his warm ones, holding it fast in his powerful grip.

"Our wedding night will be like none before it," he said. "You will reunite me with my true love." He leaned forward. She tried to pull away, but he held her. Breathing too quickly, she met his gaze, and though he looked deep into her eyes, she knew he wasn't seeing her. He was looking past her.

Once again, Cecilia felt herself slipping out of her skin. She heard his voice in a memory that wasn't her own. "*Not time, not death; nothing.*"

Giles leaned toward her. “There she is,” he said, wonder filling his voice as tears welled in his eyes. “She’s there.” He kissed her and though Cecilia felt the urge to melt against him and welcome it all, she refused. She bit down hard on his lip, wrenching her hand from his grasp and clawing at his neck.

“Grahh,” Giles said, pulling his bloody lip away from her. He grasped first one wrist, then the other, and clasped both in his hand. He shoved her against the wall and put his hand on her cheek, forcing her head to the side so she faced the priest, her face pinned between his hand and the cool wall. Any struggling brought stabbing pains up and down her spine.

And suddenly, a vial was emptied into her mouth. The priest clamped her lips shut with strong fingers and she stared into his sad eyes as she had to swallow or choke. The liquid numbed the inside of her mouth and her throat as it went down. She squirmed against Giles’s weight once, twice. Then, it felt as though all the energy had been sucked from her. She sagged between her husband and the wall.

With the priest’s help, Giles pulled her limp body down. They arranged her so that she lay comfortably, head on the pillow. Giles brushed the hair away from the sides of her face. The priest unclasped the ruby pendant from the bedpost and placed it around Cecilia’s neck.

She felt his hands tremble as he said, “We’ll need more than this to bring her into this body. It’s been so long. We’ll need some hair and—parts of the body, as well.”

Cecilia’s eyes fell closed; she thought that she should be fighting. But she was too tired to fear anything, anymore.

“I can’t, old friend.” Giles’s voice was wobbling, fading. “I can’t look at that corpse and think of it as Elaine. This is what she looks like, now.” Cecilia felt his touch, though she couldn’t say where. “You get the parts we need. I’ll ready the potion and undress this body.”

“As you wish.”

And Cecilia slept.

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King Giles slumped in a chair in the priest’s study. The book he’d been reading lay forgotten on his knee.

“Something is wrong with her,” Father Draval said.

Giles cleared his throat and stood up. The book fell to the floor with a thud and he stepped on it as he hurried toward the door.

“Is she looking for me?” he asked.

Father Draval stepped into the king’s path, blocking his exit.

“What is going on, Giles?”

The king lifted himself to his full height. “Do not address me that way.”

“Tell me,” the priest said. “I can help.”

“The queen is well,” King Giles said, shoving past the priest to open the door. “Her hunger for me is exhilarating.”

“And her lack of hunger for food or thirst for drink?”

“She’s been eating,” the King said. “We enjoy taking our meals in the royal bedchamber. Naked.”

The priest turned away and walked deeper into his study. “Well, you won’t find her there now,” he said.

“Where is she?” Giles couldn’t keep the fear from his voice.

“In the stables.”

Giles shut the door, took a single deep breath, and sped through the palace. He jogged down the stairs, eyes ever searching for witnesses who might find cause to worry in his brisk pace. He didn’t want to draw attention.

As he started toward the main doors, he heard voices in the entry. It was a visiting representative from the kingdom of Samine greeting his own men. His stomach lurched at the familiar voice. The man was a cousin of Elaine’s. The marriage between Elaine and Giles had brokered peace between Samine and his own kingdom, bringing decades of war to a halt.

Samine’s king was now livid that Giles had chosen to remarry from his own kingdom rather than stay alone or choose another Saminian bride. *If only they knew the truth,* Giles thought as he darted down a side corridor usually reserved for servants. *If only they knew the lengths I’ve gone to* not *to remarry. If they could only know I’ve brought her back.*

Spurred on by his thoughts and the echo of footsteps rising from the kitchen stairs he hurried out the narrow side door. With no one in sight, he broke into a sprint toward the stables. The stable doors were shut and the usually bustling area was deserted but for the head groom, William. The man paced before the doors, running his hands through his hair in such agitation that it seemed he might pull it by the roots.

“Your Majesty,” Will said. “So glad ye’ve come. The new queen—she came round an’ ordered all’ve us out. I begged her to lemme give ‘er some

lessons ‘fore she tried to ride but she said—well, she said she’d had plenty ‘a lessons from me.”

Giles’s heart sank as the man spoke. He stepped forward and placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, guiding him toward the doors.

“Made no sense, sire, I—” Will cut off, startled at the sound of a hoof kicking the barn wall. A panicked whinny sent a shudder up the king’s spine and he felt the man beside him pulling back, away from the door.

“Go on, Will,” the king said, doing his best to put on a curious but reassuring look. “You said it made no sense?”

“Yes, sire, I mean, no, it didn’. See I never e’en saw the queen close up, I swear. I haven’t given lessons t’ anyone since Queen Elaine passed, sire.” The man averted his eyes and allowed the king to guide him toward the stable doors again. “I gave’er her space, sire. I sent everyone away an’ shut the doors like she wanted an’ that’s when—”

A muffled scream, not of terror, but more of rage, emanated from the barn. The king paused, his hand held in midair, reaching for the latch on the door.

“That’s when the noises started,” Will finished, now actively pulling away from the king’s grasp, eyes wide.

“Look at me,” Giles said. Will stopped pulling away and met the king’s eyes as best he could after years of bowing his head to the man. “Ele... Cec... ” Giles sighed. “The Queen woke ill this morning. She’s not herself. I’m sure she’s run afoul of a horse too green for her. I’ll need your help, please, Will. Come in with me.”

Will straightened his shoulders and nodded. Giles unlatched the barn door and pushed it inward. It opened a bit and then stopped, blocked by something inside. He leaned into it and felt it give as something scooted a bit along the floor on the other side. Giles gave a firm push, pressing his shoulder to the wooden door which opened enough to admit them both. He stepped back and ushered Will through before him.

As the king stepped through, Will said, “It’s the barn cat, sire. It’s jammed under the door. Somethin’s torn it up, I....”

Giles pushed the door shut behind him as Will let out a yelp. Before them, a dead horse half lay, half hung in the aisle. Its head was still suspended from cross ties and its neck was cranked around unnaturally to allow the rest of its body to splay awkwardly on the floor. Steam rose from

its torn open midsection, and the organs and blood splashed out away from the wound like a gruesome inkblot.

Will rushed to a stall door and peered inside. He shushed and spoke softly to the horse there. It shied away from him, spinning tight, erratic circles in the darker back area of its stall, the whites of its eyes flashing. Giles spotted an open stall door down the aisle. He saw a horse's leg, parallel to the ground, twitching. Sounds of slop and shudders came from the stall.

A coolness spread through Giles's chest, slowing his heart rate, numbing him to what he was about to do. Will was still distracted. He'd moved to the next stall to look in on the occupant. Giles reached into the wheelbarrow at the side of the door and gripped the shovel that always rested there. He raised it as he moved up behind Will.

Will had always been a good hand; efficient and honest. It was the honesty that Giles couldn't risk. Will couldn't tell his story of the queen and the dead animals to anyone. As Giles made the decision, Will began to turn back to him, opening his mouth to ask a question. And so, Will saw the shovel coming down on him, and knew he'd been killed by his king.

As Will's body tumbled to the ground, the sounds from the stall ceased. After a pause, he heard scrabbling in the straw and a figure stepped to the stall door. Cecilia's body stood there a moment, drenched in blood, with chunks of flesh stuck in her hair. Her arms, soaked past the elbows, dripped blood onto the floor.

Giles dropped the shovel and took a step toward Elaine. His heartbeat thudded in his ears and the hooves of all the horses continued to pound on the floor as they panicked and jerked about in their stalls. Elaine stared and Giles wondered if she would turn on him, now. He'd been waiting for her to turn on him. But, she let out a gasp and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms.

She sobbed and kissed him, tasting of blood. Helpless to stop himself, he returned her affection, wiping the slippery, warm fluid away from her face and neck. Soon, she buried her face in his chest, her damp hands running over him.

"I can't help it, Giles. I'm so hungry. So, so hungry. Hungrrrry," the word became a long growl as she lifted her head and cocked it to the side, sniffing. Her gaze dropped to the floor behind Giles, to Will's body.

“It’s okay, love,” Giles said. “I brought you what you need.” Giles took her arm and tucked it into the crook of his own. He guided her back toward the body. She looked up at him when they came to a stop, the toes of their bloodied shoes nearly touching Will’s leg. Her eyes flickered in the dim light, seeming to morph as he watched them. For a moment he saw Elaine, sad and desperately in love. Then, he saw Cecilia, betrayed and wild with anger over her disappointed dreams.

And last, he saw something else. Something sentient and just as alive as those two women. Something strong, crafty, and soulless. When those eyes appeared, he pulled away. Cecilia’s face smiled. She lunged upon Will, tearing away his clothes, and then his flesh, with fingernails and teeth.

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Cecilia’s mother pulled her shawl around her shoulders, only to have her husband grab the end and pull it away from her. She sighed and turned a firm gaze on him.

“I’m going,” she said. “You don’t have to come, but I’m going to check on our daughter.”

“Leela,” James said, shaking his head. “You’re being silly. We know she’s fine, we just saw her. Whatever happened at the palace, she’s okay.”

“She was not fine when we saw her,” Leela said. “There was something wrong with her. It was like she was there one minute and the next she was... I don’t know. Someone else. She was someone else.”

Shaking his head with a sad smile, James stepped forward and draped the shawl back around her shoulders. “You miss her and you’re worried. I understand. We’ll go and check on her.”

Leela smiled and straightened the shawl. “Thank you,” she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss her husband.

“It’s silly, though,” he said, heading over to pull his own coat off its hook. “A wild animal in the stables is a terrible thing, but you know how Cecilia fears horses. She’d never be down there.”

“We don’t know that,” Leela said, taking her husband’s offered arm and allowing him to lead her through the house to the door. “All the rumors that have been floating around, James! Who knows how she’s changing? Who knows who he might be trying to turn her into?”

James chuckled as they stepped out into the bright, spring sunshine. “The rumors about scullery maids going missing and goats in the royal

bedchamber? Really, dear, you know better than to listen to that gossip. The only rumor I might be persuaded to believe is that food is getting thrown out the windows. I could see a royal doing that, no matter how ill advised. Food shortages all over the kingdom and the king is wasting food? Enemies at our doorstep and soon we'll have a civil war with behavior like that."

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"King Giles." The representative from Samine called the king back to the present. Giles looked up.

"I'm listening," he snapped. "Go on." But his shadowed eyes turned back to his fingernails right away. There was blood underneath them. He'd been careless in washing. He needed to be more cautious. Whatever had happened to Elaine was contagious, the incident with the maid had proven that. Killing the young woman had been... very unpleasant.

"King Giles!" This time it was his own advisor. He glanced at the fuming man. "The representatives from Samine have been with us a full week longer than anticipated. They've put up with too many delays already. Please, try to focus."

"While we are on the topic of distractions, King Giles," said one of the Saminian men, a smile beginning to turn up the edges of his lips, though it had already lit his eyes. "It that a chicken feather in your hair?"

A few of the men seated around the table laughed aloud, including some of his own men. Giles's jaw clenched; he felt hot rage swelling his chest.

"Indeed," said Elaine's cousin, no amusement on his face. "Perhaps we should discuss these new bedroom pursuits you and your new wife share."

Giles stood up, chair legs scraping across the floor behind him. He slammed his palm down on the table. Most of the men at the table leaned back, but not Elaine's cousin. Giles opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted when the door swung open and his serving man ran in.

"A thousand apologies for this interruption, sire, but the Queen needs you immediately," the man said.

Giles took off out the door. The room erupted in protest as he left. He heard shouts, picked out words like "disrespectful," "treaty," and "war." But, Elaine was all that mattered anymore. He'd help her through this. Their love had conquered death, they would conquer this sickness.

He darted up the stairs, the servant on his heels filling him in.

“Father Draval went into the bedchambers looking for a book you’d borrowed. We all thought Queen Cecilia was out. I was waiting in the doorway, keeping an eye on Draval when she appeared from the closet and lunged at him.”

Giles came to a stop outside his bedroom door. Another serving man was waiting there, holding the door handles, braced as if expecting a wild animal to charge them any moment.

“Let me enter,” he ordered.

“Sire, no,” the first man said, grabbing Giles’s arm. “She bit the priest. He fought her away and ran from the room. She came after me next, sire!” Giles jerked his arm away and pushed the second man back from his door. “Sire, please, she’ll come after you, next, I’m sure of it!”

Giles shook his head as he opened the doors. “She never attacks me.” He disappeared into the room, closing the doors firmly behind him. The two men in the corridor heard the inner lock slide into place.

They exchanged bewildered looks. The man who’d come for the king flinched and pulled back his shirt sleeve, exposing two parallel scratches on his forearm. He frowned at the wound and then looked at the other man.

“He said, “She never attacks *me*,” he said, swallowing thickly. “Does that mean she’s attacked people before?”

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At the edge of the kingdom of Montesin, the military forces of Montesin and Samine waited in the chill morning air, facing off on what all hoped would be the final day of a week-long stalemate. A lack of guidance from the Montesin king had left his generals impotent.

“No mail today.” A boy soldier rolled his shoulders one at a time and straightened his sword belt around his hips. Beside him, an older man with a darkened and lined face shrugged his own shoulders.

“Sometimes it don’t come. Nothin’ to worry about,” he said, his gaze turning to his commander. There was a sizzle in the air, a spark that the seasoned soldier knew. The battle was not far off.

“But, we’re so close to home,” the boy said. Then he paused, letting out a troubled sigh.

“Ya worried ‘bout yer family? Because we’ll ‘old this line. Bloody Saminians won’ cross into our lands.” This was a lie, but it was told with ferocity. He hoped his apparent confidence would steady the young man beside him.

“I’m worried about the rumors my sister shared in her last letter. I have this sick feeling that I should be there with them... that the danger is there....”

Then a cry cut through the chill air. It silenced as quickly as it had come. Not a battle cry and not from the right direction. It had come from behind them.

The veteran soldier looked to his commander who was risking standing to his full height, foregoing the cover provided by the hill they’d been camped behind in order to look back over his troops.

Another shout, the scream of a dying man, and the entire front line had turned to look behind them. Had the Saminians somehow managed to get around? How could they? With steep mountains to the north and a river to the south, they’d surely have seen the enemy sneaking around.

The young man glanced at the commander just in time to see an arrow pierce his shoulder. The Saminian battle cry froze the boy to the spot. Beside him, the veteran soldier he’d been paired with was shouting something, tugging on his arm. Soldiers were running past, darting around and climbing over the hills into battle with the Saminians, desperately unprepared. They’d been running away. Running straight into the enemy force.

Wondering what they feared more than Saminian swords, the boy looked west, back toward his home city. Even though his companion was now bodily dragging him up the hill, screaming in his ear, he saw. He saw a hoard of people, innocents in plain clothes, townspeople and farmers and castle guards. They were attacking the soldiers, mowing them down, oblivious to the cut of weapons. And then, women, children, elderly—a city chock-full of citizens with crazed eyes—fell upon the soldiers to rip them apart with their teeth.

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King Giles Montesin woke with a wail. Just as he had done every morning for nearly eleven months.

He heard shuffling outside his open door and three of the rotting undead pushed their way into the bedroom. Once inside, they sniffed the air, glanced at the King as he reclined in his bed, and shuffled their way back out. One of them bumped into the red-painted wall, leaving behind a greasy mark.

Giles climbed from his bed, dressed, and went to the closet. He found a simple, yet fine dress and folded it into a bag. Draping the bag across his shoulders, he set out to find his queen. He'd spotted her the day before, wandering along the river. The others... the ones she'd turned... rotted away and fell apart over time. Their putrid corpses littered the earth.

It was how he knew how far the disease had spread. Newcomers, fresher corpses, arrived in the area from time to time. These were dressed in garb from all across the continent. His people, the Montesin people, were mostly piles of carrion now, picked at by birds and carried off by dogs.

But not Cecilia, not Elaine. She looked the same as the day he'd raised her. Beautiful as ever, except for her lifeless eyes. They had never come back. The love, the horror; Cecilia, Elaine. He'd never seen them again after that day in the stables. She'd been the beast from then on. He suspected she always would be.

But, her clothes had grown tattered and waterlogged. He wouldn't leave her in such disarray. So he sought her out along the river.

The dead ones turned to watch him as he passed. But they never attacked him. They never looked at him like food. They moved away no matter how he tormented them. He'd shoved them and thrown rocks at them. He'd sliced off their limbs, their heads, stabbed their hearts. But, they never defended themselves. They died upon his blade until he grew tired of killing them. So tired....

He found his Queen wandering through a wheat field, watching one of her unholy children thrash about, caught in a wire fence. He ended the suffering of the decomposing man and turned to face Elaine. She smiled.

"You miss me," she said. Giles shuddered at the sound. She sounded like Elaine using Cecilia's voice to speak from the depths of hell. "Have you come to make love to me, Giles?"

Giles shuddered again, bile rising in his throat. Gods in heaven help him, but his body still reacted to her.

"I've come to dress you," he said. He pulled the dress out of his bag as he slowly crossed the field. The overgrown wheat swished as he moved through it, closing the gap between them. She looked stunning, if one could ignore the dirt on her skin and the evil in her eyes.

"Which means you have to undress me," she said. "You want me still, don't you, Love?"

Giles stopped, still more than an arm's length away. "I want to leave you with fresh clothes, Elaine. I'm going away today. I can't be alone anymore."

"Tsk, tsk," she chided. "You would leave your bride? What happened to your vows of love—the vows made twice? What happened to "*Not time, not death; nothing.*" When she spoke this last, her voice was terrifyingly similar to his own. And when she finished, she grinned and raised her arms to her shoulders. She slipped the dress down from her body, exposing herself.

Giles let out a gasp and threw the dress he'd brought at her. He turned away and ran desperately, stumbling through the tall stalks of wheat and occasionally tripping over the furrows of dirt. Behind him, she laughed and laughed. He didn't look back, and she did not follow. He ran until her laughter faded, and then collapsed in a panting, sobbing heap.

By the time he recovered, night had fallen. A full moon lit the world around him and the shuffling figures that walked it. He stood and got his bearings. He wasn't far from his destination. He'd lost his pack in his mindless running, but he readjusted the sword belt across his hips and took the quickest path.

He waded through a stream, the icy water biting his calves. He stepped over corpses, the smell of rot assaulting his nose and turning his insides. Still, his empty stomach growled as he passed through the archway; a deep hunger that would remain as unfulfilled as the ache in his loins, the burn in his throat, and the hollow emptiness of his soul.

His body moved without need of his mind. He'd made his way among these tombstones many times. He recalled the time he'd turned his guards away at the gate, ordering them to give him privacy. Still another time, he snuck out in the night with only Father Draval and his shovel for company—the night they brought Elaine to the surface. And now, the cemetery was populated by only him and the dead—the many below, and a few who shuffled above. He hardly noticed them.

When he reached Elaine's grave he knelt upon it and spoke to her as if she were there. He said words of love, words of apology, and finally, words of defeat. He let out a wretched cry.

Thousands of dead in his kingdom, and a million or more in the world beyond. Now, he was truly alone. But it was being without her that made him lonely. He'd ended it all for everyone because he loved her too much.

And he couldn’t go on knowing that he’d do it all again, if given the chance. He’d do it again and do it sooner.

And in that moment, he knew that loneliness was a fate he couldn’t bear.

He unsheathed his sword and pushed the pommel into the damp grass on Elaine’s grave. He raised himself higher on his knees and brought the blade to his chest, to the left of center as he’d long been taught. He drove himself down upon it and the blade lodged within his chest.

But, it was not a killing blow. He wailed and writhed upon the skewer until it tipped to the side. He lay there, fresh waves of pain spreading with each breath. The scent of his blood attracted the dead, but even then, they would not attack. They licked the blood from the sword, sucked it from the puddle that spread beneath his body, and finally, they lapped it from the corners of his mouth. They were tender with him, like Elaine would have been. And at his end, that sweet, disgusting agony was worse than any pain.

A long-time lover of storytelling, Tara began writing for fun in fourth grade. She wrote for her high-school and college newspapers and her college’s literary magazine but chose a different career path. She has since rediscovered her love of writing and decided to take her passion seriously. Her debut novel, The Scarring Underneath is available now. You can also find her work in some of the Collaborative Writing Challenge’s novels and in Twisted: A Horror Anthology.

Tara is happily married with two human children as well as dogs, cats, and guinea pigs. Born and raised in Montana, she has lived in the Pittsburgh area of Pennsylvania, and currently resides in North Dakota.

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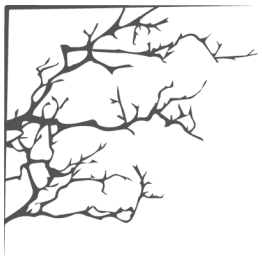

The Snow Bride
J. M. Ames

THE ICY WIND OUTSIDE screeched and wailed like a banshee seeking to devour children's souls. Frosted windows rattled in their frames so hard the glass threatened to shatter. The camels and horses tied to the posts in front of the Tsas Ber Tavern whickered and spat their displeasure at being left exposed in such inhospitable weather.

Ajir wrapped his snow-dusted paws around the steaming goblet of spiced wine, thawing them from the painful cold that hadn't yet left his aching fingers. A fire roaring in a large stone hearth did little to expel the chill of winter possessing his body. The spicy, pungent aroma wafted into his nostrils and increased his hunger.

A scarred-faced yeti named Olar stood behind the bar, polishing dirty cups with an even dirtier rag. He glanced up at Ajir and smiled, revealing his jagged, yellowed teeth.

Ajir took another large gulp of the fortified wine. Liquid fire traveled down his throat and bloomed in his chest. His cheeks tingled—the drink was taking effect. Some of the wine dripped onto his arm tattoo of an olgoi-khorkhoi bursting through the sand, a bloodied camel trapped in its well-toothed jaws.

"Sarlagiin," he bellowed, slamming his fist on the ancient wooden table. His breath puffed white in the frigid air. "I ordered honeyed sarlagiin leg, and it better be in front of me soon!"

Meat was scarce this far north, and Ajir had been anticipating this meal for quite some time. When he was back at home, things were different. Snow was rare and meat plentiful in Gryek. His belly growled to be filled.

"I've got your sarlagiin leg right here, *minótavros*! If I drizzle some honey on it, will ya gobble it up?" Olar stepped from behind the bar,

grabbed his crotch, and blew a kiss.

Ajir leapt up and his hooves slammed to the wood floor. He unsheathed the worn pickaxe from his backside and roared. His dripping fangs glistened in the candlelight as his wooden chair crashed backwards behind him. His tail jerked from side to side in agitation.

Khaji sauntered from the kitchen. “You men and your tempers. Put it back in your breeches, boys.” Her long, white fur undulated with her every move. She set a dull metallic platter on the table in front of Ajir. “Here’s your sarlagiin, sweetie. I added some fermented cheese for you, on the house.” She winked at him and stroked one of the two large horns protruding from his brow.

Her right breast brushed his well-muscled and tattooed arm as she leaned over and righted his chair. Ajir’s breathing stopped, and he stiffened. He had been working in the mines for six moon-cycles and hadn’t seen a female the entire time. Fresh, hot food wasn’t his only unfulfilled desire. He couldn’t hide the stirring in his loincloth. He’d never been with a yeti before.

“Now use your mouth for what you’re craving and eat!” She slapped Ajir’s butt and strutted to the kitchen.

Ajir’s eyes followed her swaying ass until it disappeared around the corner, then locked with Olar’s. They glared at each other for a moment before laughter overtook them.

“I’d rather be using my mouth on *that*.” Ajir nodded towards the kitchen and sat.

“You and every other tenegkhün that walks in here.” Olar removed his paw from his crotch, sniffed it, grunted, and continued wiping the bar. “But like all the warming treats we serve here, she ain’t free.”

Ajir looked up, his eyes wide, his beard already matted in grease.

“I didn’t know she was on the menu.”

Olar snickered, shaking his head. “Only for those whose satchel is large. And you clearly don’t have the markny.”

Ajir narrowed his eyes and wiped the bits of sarlagiin from his face with the back of his paw. He rose with slow, deliberate care and stalked to the bar.

“I might be light on markny, but I *do* have this.” Ajir slapped a large brown gemstone onto the countertop. He snorted with enough force to briefly lift the heavy steel ring that went through his septum. “Andesine. I

hit a small vein of it, and pocketed what I could before alerting the foreman."

Olar's eyes widened. He snatched the gem and held it to the light, squinting.

"Aye, this would cover it alright, and for the entire night, too. Including dinner, breakfast, and all the drinks you want." Olar licked his lips and slipped the andesine into his pocket. "Khaji! Our guest would like the Yeti Special."

Ajir's grin went to both of his pointed ears. "Sounds perfect."

"Well now, I guess you never know what hides in one's loincloth." Khaji slipped her paw into Ajir's and pulled him into a side room. "Can't wait to see what else you've got in there for me."

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Khaji set the platter of fresh-roasted meat on the table and sat down to sip her horn of kofye. The morning light shone through the window and glowed on her ivory fur.

Khaji stretched her arms and yawned. "It's been years. As sore as I am, it was well worth it to finally get some relief."

"Was he rough on you, my bride?" Olar asked as he ripped off a chunk of the steaming meat and stuffed it into his mouth. Its juices dripped down his matted chin fur.

"Not too bad. Once the egelisreg kicked in, he could hardly move. Don't worry, I didn't have to do *too* much before the paralysis set. After that it was easy. You were right, he *was* rich." She pulled a piece of rendered, fatty skin off the meat and licked her lips. "I take it that andesine pays off the last of my dowry?"

Olar nodded. "Aye, that and this bounty of fresh meat. This should last us a good while," he grunted. His eyes never left the gemstone.

Khaji smiled and bit into the crispy skin with the olgoi-khorkhoi tattoo, savoring the intense flavor. She was already envisioning what their life would be like together, finally married and away from all this snow—perhaps in Gryek.

J. M. Ames is a multi-genre author native to Southern California. He has several publications dating back to 2016. When not working his day job or enjoying his fatherly adventures, he writes short stories and novels, including an upcoming series.

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THE LIFE & DEATH OF CORA SVANROS

Cassidy Taylor

LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY, across the Impassable Strait and over the great plains of the Lost Fields, two sisters ran for their lives, plunging into the shelter of the dark forest just beyond the trading town of Ingfell. Cora was the older of the two, and the only thing she wanted more than her freedom was to protect her little sister.

“Run, Elda,” Cora panted, putting her hands on the smaller girl's back, urging her to go faster. The hawk screeched overhead, the high-pitched battle cry twisting Cora's insides into knots. Elda picked up speed, leaping over a dry creek bed and scrambling up the other side on all fours. Cora followed, focusing on the back of her sister’s head and the wet, copper-colored strands of hair sticking to her neck.

The next cry seemed closer, and the green canopy of leaves rustled with what could have been an errant wind or the beating wings of their pursuer.

She told herself she wouldn't run, but every time he removed her slavers bands, her instincts took over at the sight of the world stretched out in front of her. How could she pass up a chance to escape the life of a slave? A chance to change her fate?

“Just make it to the Blatqnn,” Raenar had told her the first time, a maniacal smile on his face as he traced the sharply curved blade of the knife he'd named Hauknefr, or ‘hawknose’. The Blatqnn River ran the length of the Fields, flowing fierce and wild even through the dry lands, before emptying into the salt waste beyond Ingfell. It was the border between the living world and Malos, the Realm of the Dead, but it was also the line that marked her freedom. “Beat me there, cross the black water, and you're free.”

She had not known him then, or the true impossibility of the challenge.

Elda stopped and gasped. “I can't.”

Holding her sister's hand, she tugged her forward. “We're not far,” Cora said, not sure if it was true or not. They had never seen the black waters, having grown up on an island off the northwestern coast. They had not crossed the river when the slavers brought them to Ingfell, so that meant it lay even further east. The sun hung behind her, barely visible through the thick woods. All she had to do was keep it at her back and keep the canopy above her head.

But—Elda. It always came back to her, didn't it? Her sister dropped to her knees. Cora hesitated. The forest spread out in front of her, beckoning her onward. *If you leave her, you might make it*. Shaking her head, she turned around and knelt beside her heaving sister.

“Breathe,” Cora said, “slow and steady.” Cora’s hand rubbed circles on Elda's back as the girl struggled to catch a breath. Elda was prone to breathing attacks but whether it was panic or exertion that brought them on, neither of them was sure. The girl had always had a steady hand with a fishing spear or a hunting bow, but when it came to fighting or running, she was hopeless.

Cora closed her eyes, trying to quell her own dread since there was no one here to soothe her.

“I'm sorry,” Elda gasped. “Cora, I'm so sorry.”

“It's not your....” Her words came up short. She felt the hawk before she saw him and threw herself over Elda as he dove. As large as any man, his golden feathers cut like metal against her skin. Dagger-like talons scrabbled for her back, ripping her shirt and grazing the skin beneath as he rose again.

Cora tried to stand—the least she could do was drag Elda out of the way. But there wasn't time. The bird slammed into her, knocking her back to the ground. Her fingers groped for a rock or a stick, anything she could use as a weapon, and finally closed around the rough wood of a fallen branch. She swung the branch and it connected solidly with the bird's head, sending him sprawling backward against a tree with a heavy thunk.

In the time it took for the hawk to fall to the ground, it wasn't a hawk anymore but a boy her age. Raenar Hallowtide, Chief Ienar's oldest son, first in line, slumped against the tree. He had broad shoulders and blond hair pulled back in a tight braid. Dark tattoos swirled around his temples like a target, circling his ears and trailing down his neck. The golden-

tipped whip with which Cora had become exceedingly familiar was coiled at his hip.

Worst of all, though, was his smile as he pushed himself upright and touched a finger to his bleeding lip. As satisfying as it was to draw his blood, she had never been able to cause him any more damage than a few bumps and bruises. He was invincible, unbeatable. He huffed appreciatively and then caught her under the weight of his gaze. His eyes belonged to the hawk—empty, golden-ringed pools.

One look was all it took to send her scrambling backwards. Raenar stood, brushing dry leaves from his pants, not even bothering to watch her retreat. Taking the whip from its place on his belt, he let it uncoil.

“Don't....” Cora tried to say.

“You,” Raenar said, signaling her with the whip's handle, “or her.” He shifted the whip to the left, pointing now at Elda who sat quiet and trembling, her legs pulled into her chest as if she could make herself smaller. Though still ragged, her breathing seemed to have regulated and for that Cora was relieved.

It was no choice, not really. Cora stood and lifted her tunic over her head, the homespun fabric landing in a heap at Elda's feet. Then she leaned forward, gripping the rough bark of an old oak. So many trees in this forest knew her shame. She dug in her nails, preparing herself. Screaming would only make it worse, so Cora bit her tongue until she tasted warm, salty blood and did not make a sound. The whip cut into her back, tearing open old scars and carving new ones. She retreated inside of herself, where a small part of her believed she deserved it.

She failed as she had always failed.

When the Fieldings had raided their small village on Ey Island eight years before, her mother had shoved Cora and Elda into the loft and told her to stay quiet and keep her little sister safe. Their mother, Skur Svanros, was a fierce sword-warrior, and ten-year-old Cora dutifully covered her sister's eyes while her mother took down one man after another until blood soaked the rushes that covered the dirt floor of their longhouse. But the reality of battle is that one woman cannot stand against an army, and so she had also watched while the raiders cut off Skur's fingers one by one. The woman had not screamed, and so Cora would not scream, in honor of her mother's memory.

The whip sang five more times, each strike harder than the last. Elda sobbed, Cora's shirt pressed against her mouth to muffle the sound. Just when Cora thought she could take no more, Raenar wound the whip around his wrist and approached her. He swiped a hand up her back, tracing a line of burning pain that made her flinch and grind her teeth together. When his fingers came away dripping red with her blood, he slid them down his face, leaving five red lines from his hairline to his chin. She spat in disgust, only just missing his boot, and he slapped her sharply across the face. It stung dully, and the salty taste of blood filled her mouth.

“I don't know why you continue to try,” he said to her, his breath hot against her ear. “You are mine as the whole territory will soon be mine, and everyone who lives within it will bow before me or face slavers bands around their own wrists. You must know by now that you will never be free again.”

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Cora dunked her hands into the tepid creek water and scrubbed the tunic she held against the rough rock. Three days had passed since the last chase and though the wounds itched and burned, Elda kept them slathered in pulp from the eir leaf and wrapped beneath a tight binding to ward off infection.

“How are you feeling?” her sister asked, taking the tunic from Cora and laying it flat on a dry rock where the sun beat down on it.

Cora wiped a wet hand across her forehead. “Fine,” she said. Across from them, on the opposite shore, two of the youngest Hallowtide children played with wooden swords.

“Don't be disappointed,” Elda said, her back to Cora. “We'll just... just have to try again.”

Cora didn’t want to talk about it. The smallest boy yelped after a particularly brutal blow, and dashed away, over a rise and out of sight. “Watch them, will you?” Cora instructed her sister, plucking the next tunic from the pile and dunking it beneath the clear water.

Elda disappeared behind the boys, hollering for them to not go too far, and Cora relaxed, sinking back onto her heels and closing her eyes. Her right hand drifted over her left wrist, her fingers tracing the smooth line of the golden slaver's band there. She would never admit it to her sister, but she wasn't sure she wanted to try again. They had been in Ingfell for eight years and it seemed like she would be here for the rest of her life. Was it

worth it, the constant pain? All it seemed to be was a perpetual reminder of her failures. At the very least, she wouldn't have to decide again for a few weeks. Raenar had left Ingfell the morning after the chase, he and his father leading the clan warriors south to meet an opposing chieftain’s raiding party. If things went well for them, Raenar would return in high spirits with an envoy of new slaves to torture. If they went poorly, well...Cora didn’t want to think about it.

A joyous shriek rang out over the rise. Elda must have caught one of the boys. Cora was just about to resume her scrubbing when there was a noise behind her. A soft sigh, barely distinguishable from the sound a breeze might make as it weaved through the leaves. Turning, Cora hesitated at what she saw, then rose slowly to her feet. There at the edge of the path that led back to Ingfell stood a cloaked figure, its shoulders hunched forward. When it raised its arms to pull back its hood, Cora had the sudden urge to protest.

But she was too late. The hood fell back to reveal two empty eye sockets, the ancient skin around the holes puckered and gray. The sadj's lips were an unnatural black and his skin was folded in deep wrinkles.

“Cora Svanros,” he said, his voice deep and coarse. “I've come a long way to find you.”

“Me?” The sopping wet tunic she still held in her hand dripped onto her bare toes. She dropped it back onto the dirty pile and clasped her trembling hands in front of her.

She knew, of course, what a sadj was but had never come face to face with one. The blind seer, the wise fool. Most were nomadic—traveling from town to town, trading prophecy for food and a warm bench. It was not uncommon to find a sadj in Ingfell, but she had never sought one out. Not only did she have nothing to trade, she had also never given much thought to her future beyond the next day and surviving Raenar’s chases.

The sadj moved forward blindly, a strange mist following him. Cora was torn between rushing forward to help him as she would any elderly man, and turning to flee. Her indecision gave the sadj a chance to reach her and he trapped one of her wet hands between both of his, his skin cold and papery. “I see you.”

“Why me?” she choked out, turning her face from his stale breath. She had come upon a corpse in the field once, a man who had been cut down

by a neighbor. It had been rotting in the sun for days, the carrion birds already working at his flesh. That was how the sadj smelled.

“I do not ask why,” he answered, his face aimed at her, his blind gaze uncannily accurate. She wasn't sure where to look—she didn't want to see any of it. “I am but a messenger of the gods.”

“I have nothing to give you.” She wanted to be clear on that point.

“I ask for nothing in return, only that you listen, if you wish. Once you know, you cannot forget.” There was a warning in his voice. A sadj’s visions could make or break even a chieftain. Did she really want to know what he had to say to her, to know her fate? Even if it meant seeing her death at Raenar’s hand, knowing that she would never succeed in escaping this place?

Yes, she did. Because it might mean a chance to change the outcome, to save her sister. Or maybe even to save herself. “I'm ready.”

The mist that had been lingering at the sadj’s feet crept up her legs, sending tingles along her spine. Soon it rose to wrap around them both, blocking out the light of the sun and the sounds of the river. It was so disorienting that Cora wasn't even sure she was still in Ingfell. When he spoke again, his voice was all around her though his black lips didn't move.

I see a golden bird wielding a whip. I see a knife in your heart and a crown of fire, seven drops of blood and new love's kiss. I see a river of shadows and three feathers, plucked from the beating heart of the Crow of Malos—one to cross the river, two to kill the hawk, and three to make a choice.

The sadj dropped Cora's hand, and just as quickly, the darkness and the mist dissipated and she was back on the bank of the creek.

“What does it mean?” Cora asked, working through the puzzle in her head. The golden bird had to be Raenar, and the river of shadows would be the Blatqnn with its black waters. The Blatqnn, the line between the living and the dead, between slavery and freedom. Did the key to killing the hawk lie across the river in the Realm of the Dead?

“I am but a messenger of the gods,” the sadj repeated.

“Cora!” Elda's voice rang out over the clearing. Cora turned; her sister stood at the top of the hill on the opposite bank, framed by the trees. Her cheeks were flushed and the two Hallowtide boys were tugging at her hands. “Are you okay?”

“Did you....” Cora turned back to the sadj, only to find that she was alone. A bird chirped in a low-hanging branch, and a squirrel scampered up a tree, but there was no sign of the old man.

“What?” Elda shouted back, laughter in her voice as she struggled against the boys. Cora forgot sometimes how young her sister was. How young they both were.

“Nothing!” Cora called back, but she couldn't shake the chill that had come with the sadj’s words.

There was only one way into Malos, and that way was death.

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“I'm not doing it.” Gone was the light-hearted tone in Elda's voice, replaced by something harder, something bordering on anger. Cora had never heard it from her before. Her sister was always able to see the sun behind any cloud.

“It has to be you,” Cora insisted. “I can't do it myself, and there's no one else I trust.” She lay on her stomach on the bench she shared with her sister in the barn. Elda spread pulp from the eir leaf on Cora's back and placed strips of clean, white cloth over the healing wounds.

“You don't have to do it at all,” Elda said.

Cora turned her head to look at her sister who knelt beside her, staring straight ahead, Cora's back forgotten. The barn was dark, illuminated only by the small lantern in their loft. There was the usual noise below, but she had grown used to the grunts and shuffles of sleeping animals. Even the scurry of rats over the barn floor was familiar now, and somehow comforting. In the dim light her sister's face was drawn, the hollows beneath her eyes and cheekbones cast in dark shadows.

Cora reached out a hand and placed it on her sister's arm, just above where one of her slaver's bands wrapped around her wrist. “I’m not afraid,” she said. “It is not goodbye.” Cora sounded surer than she felt. To a Fielding, death was simply the end of one life and the beginning of the next. It was the ultimate goal, to leave this world and go with the gods. But she didn't want to die. It wasn't that she was afraid of the pain; she was used to that. It was that she was scared for Elda, scared to leave her here alone. The thought made her stomach turn, her breathing shallow. What would Raenar do when he came home and found out that Elda had killed her? Unless Cora could return before he did, Elda would have to fight for her own life for the first time.

“But I can’t do it alone.” It wasn't easy for Cora to admit. She had tried to protect Elda for so long that she had grown accustomed to doing everything on her own. When she saw happiness on the girl's face, or heard the hope in her words, it made it all worth it. But this was not something she could do without her. She *wouldn't* do it, not if Elda didn't help her.

“A knife in your heart?” Elda asked, meeting Cora's eyes at last.

“That's what he said.”

“And you're sure this was real? What if... what if it was just...?”

“I know what I saw,” she said. “I know what he said. I have to go to Malos, and the only way there....” She didn't want to have to say it again.

“Is to die,” Elda finished for her.

“Yes,” Cora said.

“But one of the feathers....”

“Is to *cross the river*. It will bring me back.”

“And if it doesn't?”

Cora pushed herself to sitting, the strips of cloth on her back clinging to skin and pulling at the sensitive wounds. She winced, but didn't relent until she was looking her sister in her eyes. “It will be worth it,” she said, “to be rid of Raenar.” It wasn’t just for them. It was for everyone in the Lost Fields. To rid the world of Raenar would be to save hundreds, maybe even thousands, from death or slavery. He was a tyrant like his father before him, and tyranny would reign until they were stopped.

“One to kill the hawk.”

“One to kill *him.*” That was what would make this all worth it.

“What about the rest?” Elda asked. “The blood and the kiss?”

Cora shrugged. “I guess we'll know when the time comes.”

They both grew quiet, lost in their thoughts. If she said no, Cora wouldn't push her again.

“Okay,” Elda said. “I'll do it.”

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It seemed only right that Hauknefr would be the blade to take her life. Raenar had left his prized knife behind, as he always did, to not risk losing it on the battlefield. It hadn't been hard for Cora to take it from the longhouse the next morning when she had returned the clean clothes, and now she handed it over to her sister. Elda looked down at it and then slowly closed her fingers around the smooth hilt. The steel blade was wicked; Raenar sharpened it almost obsessively.

“What do you think it will be like?” Elda asked, her eyes on the blade. They were back in the loft after a long, listless day. They had both gone through their chores as if in a daze and had hardly eaten anything. Cora's stomach ached, though from nerves or hunger she couldn't say. Probably a combination of both.

“What? To stab me?”

“No,” Elda said quickly, shutting her eyes against the idea. “Malos.”

Malos. The Realm of the Dead. The Land of Shadows. The stories did not have much good to say about it. Its counterpart, Elanos, the Realm of Warriors, was where most Fieldings strived to end up. There, her mother and other warriors feasted with Lumos, the god of light and life, for all eternity. Malos was governed by Lumos's brother, Valdos, god of darkness and death. A monster, it was said, with eyes as black as his soul.

“Dark,” Cora said quietly.

“Peaceful, maybe,” Elda said.

“Terrifying,” Cora added.

“Perhaps Valdos will be kind. Maybe if you tell him that the sadj sent you....”

Cora huffed a small laugh. “You can't help it, can you? Everything just has to be *good* for you.” Even though the words came out harsh, she hadn't meant it as a bad thing. It was what she loved about her sister. “Let's just get this over with,” she said, to avoid having to look at Elda's face.

Cora lay on the bench, her arms at her side. She exhaled a quick breath and stared up at the ceiling. Elda leaned over, her red hair a curtain around them.

“Cora.”

“You have to do it....”

“No, that's not what I wanted to say. I know that you... just, thank you.”

Unbidden tears sprouted in the corners of Cora's eyes and a lump formed in her throat. “Anything for you.” Silence stretched between them until Cora couldn’t stand it. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, hopefully just a few days, before Raenar returns.” Unable to say anything else for fear of losing her composure, she lifted a hand and tapped herself on the chest, just over her left breast. That was the spot. *A knife in your heart.*

Elda positioned the blade there, two hands on the hilt, just like Cora had shown her. Cora’s heart pulsed against the sharpened tip, racing with wing-like flutters against the inside of her skin. She could still stop it. All

it would take— No. She closed her eyes, gripped the edge of the bench and ground her teeth together.

And then there was pain, a great ripping sensation that rocketed from her heart to all of her limbs, like she was being torn into a thousand tiny pieces. Her eyes flew open. She wanted to bring her hands to her chest, to cover the hilt of the knife buried there, but she had lost control of her arms. She blinked and coughed, something wet spewing out of her mouth. Elda was sobbing, her hands holding the knife in place. Her heart; oh, she felt as if she had betrayed her own heart as it sputtered against the intruder.

“Elda,” Cora whispered, not sure if she had truly spoken, and then she was outside of her body, looking down at the scene in the loft. Her corpse, broken and bloody; Elda kneeling over her, hands still on the weapon. “You can let go now.”

Her little sister jerked her head up, tear-filled eyes wide as she looked around the loft. Her gaze passed right over where Cora, or what was left of her, now stood, but it was obvious that the girl couldn't see her. Then Elda removed her hands from the hilt of the knife, leaving it inside Cora's chest, and brought a thick woolen blanket to cover her face.

There was a tugging in Cora’s gut, right behind her belly button, that led her through the barn door and into the darkness of the night. The sutvithr tree that sat before the longhouse, with its weeping branches brushing the ground, whispered in the gentle breeze but Cora couldn't feel it. She couldn't feel the ground beneath her feet, or smell the smoldering embers of the hearth fires. A few yards away, a cat leapt from a roof and landed on the path. It looked at her, reflective green eyes flashing, then fled.

Her feet moved her forward almost against her will. It was instinctual; she didn't know where she was going but she knew she had to go. Soon she was in the woods, surrounded only by darkness. The trees that had sheltered her in her flight from Ingfell loomed threateningly overhead like giants ready to consume her. She had once liked the way that night blurred the lines, made her feel invisible, but this felt different. This felt like she was suffocating.

She moved fast without even meaning to, faster than she had ever run in her life. The tugging in her belly grew stronger, pulling her forward with more and more momentum. Cora felt like she had forgotten

something, like someone she had always known was on the other end. What was there, waiting for her in Malos?

Dark and terrifying, she remembered telling Elda.

Peaceful and kind had been Elda's response.

Finally, the deathly silence was interrupted by the unmistakable sound of rushing water. When she had lived on Ey Island, their home had been just a short walk from the shore. She had grown up listening to the crashing waves, but this was nothing like their soothing hush. This was the sound of water that was in a hurry, water that had cut a path through the land for thousands of years and would still be here long after everyone had left this place. She emerged into a small clearing and there it was. The Blatqnn, the river that had eluded her for eight years. Standing in the middle of it, in water up to his knees, was a man. He held a hand out to her and, without thinking twice, she plunged into the raging waters.

Though the river thundered against her and should have swept her away, Cora kept her footing. She powered forward against the current and she saw why people described the river as black. Dark shapes swirled beneath the surface, shadows hinting at greater terrors. As she drew nearer, she saw that the man was not wet. He was somehow serene, unbothered by his surroundings. He seemed young, maybe a few years older than Cora, and was taller than any man she had ever seen, with long black hair pulled back in a series of knots and a rough beard hiding his mouth. His attractiveness was tempered by his eyes, which were two black orbs like bottomless pits set into his face.

He reached for her and her hand found his. Soon he was hauling her forward, guiding her through the water to the opposite bank. She scrambled up the small rise behind him, then stopped when he turned to look at her. Something drove her to her knees; not something outside of her, but the same sensation that had drawn her to the Blatqnn. So she knelt, bowing her head and not understanding why, only knowing that she had no choice.

To her surprise, the man's handsome face appeared before hers as he also knelt. This close, she saw that the black cloak he wore was not fur but feathers, as black as the night sky. With one meaty hand, he tilted her chin up to meet his eyes. Then he pressed that same hand to her chest, just above her heart. When she looked down, she was surprised to see the

jagged wound that Hauknefr had made. There was no blood or pain; it was just a part of her now.

“Welcome to Malos,” the man said. “I am Valdos. I have come to take you home.”

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When she emerged from the forest behind Valdos, Cora was surprised to find them looking down on a town. Just below where they stood was the great hall, ten times larger than the longhouse in Ingfell, and the homes stretched out from there, curving around a black coastline. There must have been hundreds of small homes with thatched roofs pointing toward the black sky. Jetties dotted the coast, long wooden fingers sticking out into the water.

But as they approached, Cora felt more than saw that it was different from any town she had ever known. The darkness was another resident, slinking around corners and filling in the empty spaces. The people they passed were both there and not there—insubstantial, like shadows in the night that she could only see out of the corners of her eyes. She trailed behind Valdos, whose long strides kept him several feet ahead of her. As they approached a market, he finally stopped and looked back at her.

“What do you think?” he asked, a smile tilting his cheeks. He was *proud*. This was the monster that governed this realm? Cora had expected a beast not a man, and especially not a man that looked like he did. She tore her eyes from him and scanned the market.

Dozens of figures milled about and smoke rose from as many roofs. The stalls were arranged in rows, with vendors selling meat and fish, swaths of cloth, homespun clothes, butter, vegetables—anything that a person, or a spirit, could want. Cora turned to Valdos, her brow furrowing.

“Do the dead eat?” she asked.

He laughed, a strand of inky black hair dropping across his face. “The dead must live too,” he said, grinning as he tucked the hair back behind his ear. She felt as if she were the victim of some joke that she hadn't yet begun to understand. He clapped a heavy hand on her shoulder and steered her toward one of the stands displaying silver fish on crates of ice.

Behind the booth stood a young woman about Cora's age. The iron slaver's bands on her wrists betrayed her station as a thrall in life, and the gash across her throat revealed the manner of her death.

“Hirasil,” Valdos boomed at her.

“Good morning, Val,” she responded.

Morning? Cora's eyes wandered to the black sky. If this was morning, where was the sun? There was not a hint of light on the horizon. In fact, the moon was just overhead, full and shining white.

“How was today's catch?” he asked. He picked up a fish and sniffed it, bouncing it in his hand as if its weight would tell him something.

“Oh, it will do, I suppose,” Hirasil answered, then lowered her voice, leaning forward conspiratorially. “Old Vause tried to trade one bushel of potatoes for an entire crate of fish. I told him what he could do with his potatoes.” The two laughed and Cora tried to make sense of everything. Then, Hirasil turned her gaze on Cora. “Who's this?”

“Hirasil, meet Cora, our newest arrival.” Val stepped back, urging Cora forward with a sweep of his hand.

“Hello, Cora,” the girl said, her voice high and lilting. She seemed to shift appearance as she spoke—her eyes going from green to blue, her jawline changing from round to sharp. Cora blinked and she solidified, becoming a girl with long, dark hair, big ears, and a small nose that tapered to a point in the middle of her dainty face.

“Come,” Valdos said, turning away, beckoning to Cora. He reminded her of the Hallowtide children—bouncing from one thing to the next. “There's more to see.”

Cora nodded a hasty goodbye to Hirasil but as she turned, a cold hand gripped her arm and turned her back. “You aren't like us,” Hirasil said, pulling her hand away.

“What do you mean?” Cora asked.

“You're too alive.”

Cora backed away, feeling afraid without Valdos at her side. Turning, she ran after him. The market faded behind them, almost as if without them there it didn't exist at all.

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In the longhouse, Valdos handed her a mug filled with what appeared to be steaming hot cider but she was surprised to realize she wasn't thirsty, in spite of her journey. The hearth beside the table roared with an orange fire, but she didn't feel its heat. She barely tasted the cider, not sure if the lingering spice on her tongue was its flavor or simply the idea of what she expected it to taste like. Valdos sat across the table from her and watched her drink.

“Do I still have to eat and drink?” she asked when she tired of his stare.

He placed his hands flat on the table and looked at them while he spoke. “The dead subsist on memory.” A black shadow, like the ones she had seen beneath the Blatqnn, curled around his wrist and snaked along his hand. Cora's breath caught in her throat and she leaned backward as it began to move across the table toward her. Valdos flicked his arm and the shadow turned away, though Cora could see reluctance in its slow movements. “Without memory, they become something else. Something...dark.” He flicked his wrists, then raised his hands, flipping them back and forth so she could see that the shadow had gone.

“They become the darkness?” she asked, remembering how it had felt like another presence.

Valdos nodded. “Eating. Working. Sleeping. It will keep you in your human form. I will always call you by your name, so you will remember.”

“Will it happen to me?” she asked. It had been so disconcerting the way Hirasil had shifted in and out of focus, like she was trying to choose what she looked like, how she wanted to appear to Cora. But could Cora choose, if she wanted? Could she heal the scars on her back? Close the wound on her chest? Free herself from the slaver's bands?

He reached across the table and put a hand on her arm, just above the golden cuff. “It happens to us all. You'll start to forget and it will hurt, but then it won't be so hard anymore.”

She couldn't forget, but when she looked into Valdos's bottomless black eyes it seemed like it would be the easiest thing in the world to do. Let go of the living world, settle into the darkness. Dropping her gaze, she stared into her cup and forced herself to recall their faces. Elda. Raenar. The sadj and his words that had started this whole thing. As always, so much depended on her and she hoped that she would not fail this time.

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There were no birds in Malos. Seven days passed without so much as a sighting. Or at least Cora was calling them days. Time seemed to pass in a cycle of eating, working and sleeping, and so she began to grow accustomed to not having the sun to guide her through the hours. She lived with Hirasil and the fisherwomen in one of the small houses near the beach but spent her nights alone on her bench, thinking about Elda.

Valdos had been right; it was harder to remember her, and sometimes Cora would wake up and not remember anything about the life she had, that she had to get back to. But in the quiet of the night, she could bring Elda's face into her mind. After years of protecting her, she had left her little sister alone for the first time. Whenever Cora thought about it, even though her heart no longer beat in her chest it would contract like a giant hand squeezed it.

New souls came frequently into Malos, always guided by Valdos whose shadows wrapped around his limbs like possessive pets.

He introduced her to them, his eyes on her until she had to look away. “This is Cora Svanros.” She liked the way he said her name—like it was a title, something to be given honor and attention.

One morning, she finally asked Hirasil, “Where are all the birds?” They were reeling in a net full of the same silver fish that Hirasil had been selling at the market. They were far from shore, but not so far that they couldn't see Malos looming in the distance. Other boats dotted the harbor as the fisherwomen collected the day's catch.

Hirasil tossed the net into the boat and looked up at Cora. Her eyes shifted from gray to green, and then settled on a light brown. “There are none this side of the Blatqnn.”

“You've never seen a crow here?” Cora asked as she picked up the oars and began to pull them through the water. Hirasil worked to untangle the net, extracting the fish and dropping them into the wicker basket between the girls.

“No,” Hirasil answered without hesitating. “Of course not.”

Cora brought their boat easily to the dock and lifted the heavy basket up to Hirasil. They walked side by side down the planks to the shore, the basket slung between them, and loaded it onto the waiting cart. Relieved of their burden, Hirasil turned toward town, but Cora hung back.

“Coming?” Hirasil called over her shoulder. Cora knew what waited for them in town... a dinner from the day’s catch, gossip about the new arrivals. And Val’s company if he wasn’t traveling. He had eaten with them once or twice, but his presence was unnerving. He was too bright and too solid in a place that was constantly shifting. She only noticed it in his absence, when the darkness felt more absolute.

“You go ahead,” she said with a wave. She didn’t feel up for any of it.

Turning left, she walked along the beach as the dark sand turned into pebbles and eventually the gently sloping shore dropped sharply into rocky cliffs. The waves beat against the narrow beach so she turned inland and found fields of tall grasses unbent by breezes or storms sprouting from the sandy soil.

The more distance she put between herself and Malos, the more she felt the darkness like it was walking beside her. Shadows pressed against her, weaving themselves around her limbs, pushing her forward. Dry grasses scratched her legs and grabbed at the hem of her dress as if to hold her back.

"Cora." The sound of her name reached her ears like a whisper at first, hesitant and almost inaudible. She froze. "Cora!" It came again, this time louder. Her mother's voice, strong and commanding. Cora began to run.

Soft sand sank beneath her feet, sending her stumbling as she plowed forward. "Mom!" she called out in response, using her hands to right herself.

"Hide, Cora." She knew these words, had re-lived them hundreds of times in her nightmares.

"Mom, I'm coming!" Cora didn't know if her mother could hear her, didn't know what she was doing here. She burst unexpectedly into a clearing, and suddenly the voice was all around her.

"Cora, Elda, hide," it echoed, ringing in her ears.

At Cora's feet was a pool of water that shone icy blue even in the dark. Floating in the middle was her mother's face, the white scar across her eyebrow, her pale hair floating around her head. "Go to the loft, take your sister. Keep her safe. Quiet now, hurry."

Then there was Elda's five-year-old face, not so different from the face she had left behind. Wide, green eyes and a smattering of freckles across her dainty nose and rosy cheeks. Cora reached for her instinctively, sinking to her knees at the edge of the pool. "Cora, I'm scared," Elda said, but her voice was not a young child's voice. It was the older, scared voice of the sister she had left behind in Ingfell.

Keep your sister safe. Don't make a sound.

"No," Cora said. "I don't want to see this." But she couldn't look away. Was her mother still there just beyond her line of sight? Could she see her, help her, save her, if she could just reach her? The water was around her knees now. Her hands scrabbled through the pond, searching, reaching.

Sucking in a deep breath, she let herself sink beneath the surface, keeping her eyes open against the glow of the water. There they were, two little girls hiding in a loft. If she could just—

A hand wrapped around the back of her tunic and suddenly she was pulled out of the pool and thrown unceremoniously to the grass at its edge. She rolled once and then lay completely still, her hands feeling as if they were bound to her sides. For a moment, she couldn't remember who or where she was. There was only the endless black sky, the suffocating darkness.

"Stay with me, Cora Svanros," Valdos said. She hadn't even noticed the shadows attached to her arms and legs that had been drawing her forward. He knelt over her and ripped them off, his cold hands brushing against her bare skin. His touch sent shockwaves through her whole body, and the darkness reluctantly relinquished her, slinking back into the pond, leaving her blinking and breathless.

When he was satisfied that they were all gone, Valdos pulled her to a sitting position and then dropped down beside her to stare intently into her face. He was making sure, she realized, that a part of her hadn't disappeared.

"You found the Memory Pool," he finally said, his face relaxing into a relieved half-smile. They both kept their backs to the bright water. Its glow cast their shadows far out in front of them across the field.

"I guess I did," she said. "But I thought memories were what kept us here. That was... that was something different."

He looked sideways at her. "It's a tight line to walk, to remember who you were but to still look forward to the future. There is nothing for you back there."

She looked away from him, unable to hold his dark gaze. "I saw..."

"Your defining moment," he finished for her when he realized she would not be able to put it into words. When she remained silent, he asked, "Do you want to know what I see?"

She hesitated, then nodded, looking down at her hands.

"I see my father's face the moment he threw me from Elanos with my brother, Lumos. We fell for seven days and fought the whole way down. I landed on this side of the Blatqnn, and Lumos on the other. We made of our lives what we could with what we had been given—the betrayal of a parent who hated us."

“My mother loved us. She died to protect me and my sister,” Cora told him. “It doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Of course not,” he said. Reaching a hand out almost hesitantly, he brushed strands of wet bangs from her face with a small smile. “I thought I had lost you, and just as I was getting to know you.”

He was so close and so solid beside her, and she was so tired that when he put an arm around her shoulders, she leaned into him and let her head drop down to rest in the crook of his neck. She felt the call of the Memory Pool behind her, the shame of her greatest failure, her mother’s disappointed eyes on her back. And even though she desperately wanted to turn around, Valdos’s grip kept her facing forward. The closer she moved to him, the further away the memories felt. He had said there was nothing for her back there, and a small part of her was beginning to believe it.

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That night, Cora couldn't sleep. She lifted herself onto her arms and looked around. The other girls were still on their benches, their furs bunched around gray faces that flickered eerily in sleep as their dreams changed their memories of themselves. At least, that's what Cora assumed happened. Sometimes the girls would wake up looking like someone completely different, only to resolve back into themselves by the time they left for work.

Slipping out from beneath the furs on her bench, she went outside. Only a few yards away, gentle waves lapped against the shore beside the jetty where the fishing boats were docked. It reminded her of the black waters of the Blatqnn and, just beyond it, the town of Ingfell, where her sister lived in constant fear of the hawk's cry.

Cora had dared to hope, dared to believe that there was a way out; a way to defeat Raenar. There was no crow; all she was doing was wasting time and putting Elda at risk. And the worst part of all was the way she had felt sitting beside Val... safe, comfortable, happy. Who was she to deserve that, knowing what she had left behind? Knowing that in Ingfell and all the Hallowtide territories, families were torn apart. Women were abused and children were sold. How strange that the Realm of the Dead would feel like a safer place to be. The stories painted Val as a monster, but he was infinitely kinder than Raenar had ever been.

She hadn’t just failed Elda; she had doomed all of them to another lifetime of slavery. The guilt ate away at her like the waves clawing at the

beach. She wasn't doing this anymore. She couldn’t stay here and be safe and happy while Elda suffered. This wasn’t where she belonged.

She turned back to the town and the quiet houses stared back at her. Only the darkness swirled, creeping from door to door. If she was going to go, it would have to be now.

It wasn't hard to find the well-traveled path through the woods. She had watched Valdos emerge from that spot countless times over the past week. The silence of the trees was just as disconcerting as it had been the first time she came through here but she pushed herself forward, feet flying along the path. *Make it to the Blatqnn, and you'll be free*. How many times had she heard that over the past eight years? She knew now that she would never be free. No one would.

The black waters came into view after what felt like mere minutes, the water's roar almost deafening in the silence. She couldn't stop, couldn't hesitate... afraid she might change her mind, or worse, forget why she had come here at all. The first time she crossed, it had felt as though her feet were anchored with stones; she had been immovable. Valdos had been there to guide her, his hand cold in hers but steady and strong.

Now she was alone and as she lunged into the river, the water whipped against her legs, sweeping them out from beneath her. She flipped head over feet, twisting and trying to regain her footing. She broke the surface once but was quickly pulled back under. Something grabbed her ankle, tugging her backwards. Something else brushed against her cheek. She screamed as the black shadows converged on her, wrapping around her body, consuming her.

No. No! Her feet touched something solid and she pushed off of it, her head slicing through the rough waters until she emerged back into the open air. She had grown up swimming in the salt waste off the coast of Ey Island; she knew what to do. Turning in the direction of the current, she gave a strong kick, using her arms to paddle and pull her forward.

The shadows caught her anyway. The souls of the dead who had forgotten and been forgotten. They dragged her backward, erasing any progress she made. This wasn’t the benevolent curiosity of the Memory Pool or the eager enthusiasm of the spirits that haunted Malos. This was different, dangerous, angry. She clawed at them, but her fingers passed right through the inky blackness. Valdos had touched them, controlled them, but he was their king. Who was she? She was nobody.

Just before her head submerged again, she heard something she had longed to hear ever since coming to Malos—the warbled call of a crow. And then she was beneath the surface, her body now almost completely wrapped in black tendrils. How long would Elda wait for her before giving up? Before losing the hope that made her the way she was? How long before Elda was ruined by Cora's failure?

The shadows crept up her neck, slipping over her chin. Her arms were suspended at her sides, her yellow hair a ring around her head. She kept her eyes turned upward so that she could see the moon, a distant white pinprick of light, until even it was extinguished by a dark figure.

A figure that was crashing through the water, reaching for her. Black claws wrapped around her shoulders and she was jerked upwards, the darkness slinking away, melting off her. It pulled her out of the water and she gasped for breath that she didn't need. Wind buffeted her as she was slung through the air in the grip of some kind of monster.

The flight only lasted moments, barely long enough for her to be afraid, and soon solid ground was beneath her once more. On her hands and knees, she panted and heaved, though of course nothing came up, not even a drop of water.

"Caw!"

Slowly, she lifted her eyes. The crow was massive, its black beak as long as her arm. Falling back, she scrambled away from the bird; all she could think of was Raenar, the golden hawk, the cruelty that she had endured for so many years.

Three feathers, plucked from the Crow of Malos. This was what she had come here for. She couldn't be afraid. It had saved her, taken her from the Blatqnn and dropped her back on land. Yes, she was still in Malos on the eastern shore, but with its feathers—o*ne to cross the river*—she would be able to go home, to finish what she had started. The crow cocked its head to the side, training one beady black eye on her. Without taking her eyes from it, she pushed herself to standing.

"Hi there," she choked out. The bird extended its wings. "No, no," Cora begged, holding a hand out. "Don't go."

The crow flapped its wings and Cora squinted against the wind that beat her. Once, twice, and then the bird began to change, like the form had just been a mantle, a disguise, and suddenly Valdos was standing in front

of her, his feather cloak tucked tight around his shoulders, his black hair loose around his face.

Cora gasped, jerking her hand back and feeling frozen in place, her mind reeling. “I don't understand,” she said.

He cocked his head and in that movement she saw that he had always been the crow and the man, and she just had not known which one to bring into focus. “I thought,” he said, his voice low and humorless, “that you of all people might, Cora Svanros.”

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Cora couldn't bring herself to look at him. She sat across from him at the same table they had talked over when she first arrived. The smell of hot cider wafted up to her nose from the mug below, but she didn't move to drink it. She was ashamed and scared. He had been so kind to her. And all along he had been keeping this from her, the fact that he was the same as her tormentor. She was doomed to an eternity of remembering.

“When my brother and I fell, my father gave us each the gift of flight to save our lives. Your tormentor must be descended from him to have the gift. Lumos was never particularly careful in that regard.”

Cora scoffed, still not looking at Val. *The gift*. What could have gone so wrong inside of Raenar that he used his gift as a weapon? Was he angry at the gods, at his father, for leaving him behind? Was it that he wanted to be the center of attention, the one receiving sacrifices? Or was it that he, like Cora, was never quite good enough, strong enough, fast enough? Lumos had left him with the humans, and the only way Raenar could forget his own failure was to make Cora fail again and again. Was to hold others captive so that they could never leave him as his father had.

“I would never hurt you,” Valdos said, coming around the table to sit beside her. His presence was all-consuming, like the shadows that had held her under the water.

“I want to believe you,” she admitted. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, to trust him. But she couldn’t help feeling betrayed. She had let him wrap his arm around her and give her comfort all while he was the same as Raenar. He had made a mockery of her feelings. She didn’t think she would ever feel safe again. “Why didn't you tell me?”

He turned to face her, legs straddling the bench. His eyes were swirling black orbs, just like the crow's. How had she not figured it out before?

“Because I didn't want you to have to be afraid anymore. I know what he did to you.” His hand on her back was as solid as a block of ice.

She had never seen her back, but knew from what Elda told her that it was a mess of white and pink scars, the skin raised in some places. Neither of them looked away as his hand slid beneath the bottom of her shirt and grazed against the folds and lines that Raenar had left there. She shivered as he ran a finger down a ridge that crossed from her shoulder to her hip.

“You can fix this,” he said, his voice low, his head tilted toward hers. “It's up to you to make it go away.”

Could she do that? Could she forget? Hadn't she fought for long enough? He was so close, and his eyes were so dark that she thought she could fall into them and just get lost. She held her breath, ready to dive into their depths. His hand pressed firmly against her back, moving her towards him until their lips met. She raised a hand to his shoulder, but did not push him away. Instead, she let his heart beat against her chest, a steady pulsing that she hadn't felt since coming to Malos. He tilted her head back and she opened herself to him, moving her hands to his face, then his hair, wrapping them around his neck to pull him closer. His beard scratched her chin and the memory of her heart fluttered wildly, warmth like blood raced in her veins, coloring her cheeks.

He pulled away, leaving her gasping, pressing his face to hers. With his breath tickling her ear and his solid chest pressed against her, she didn't know if she had ever felt more alive.

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Behind the fish stall, Cora stood with a smile on her lips, the secret of what had happened between her and Valdos rolling around inside of her. The market was bustling with noise as the residents of Malos wove in and out of the crowd and hollered back and forth to each other. The moon was, as always, bright overhead, chasing away the lurking shadows in this part of town.

“You seem different,” Hirasil said as she wrapped two silver fish for a bearded man. His appearance was startling—he was almost completely gray, as if the color had been leached out of him. Had this man been blind to colors, or was this how he had seen himself in life?

“I feel different,” Cora said, and it was true. She felt lighter, like a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, though she couldn't remember what it was. She was happy now as she had never been in life.

“Your bands are gone,” Hirasil said as the gray man walked away.

“Bands?” Cora looked down at the smaller girl.

“Your bands,” Hirasil repeated, holding her wrists up to show Cora the two thin, iron bands there and the chafed skin underneath. “I've never been able to forget that part.”

Cora dropped her eyes to her wrists, the fingers of her right hand tracing a circle around her left arm. What was she forgetting? It was there, in the back of her mind, like a dimly glowing ember.

“Cora Svanros.”

She would know that voice anywhere. Her wrists forgotten, Cora looked up into the dark eyes of Valdos, expecting to see a smile on his face and instead finding his lips pressed into a stern line. “Val?” she asked.

“I'm so sorry,” he said, and he stepped aside.

A small girl stood behind him in bare feet and a white smock dress. She had red hair, freckles across her cheeks, and brown eyes so light they were almost gold. But the strangest part of all was the smoke wafting from her, and the crown of fire crackling around her head. The look in the new arrival's eyes caused the ember of memory to ignite, and it all came rushing back to Cora.

“Elda,” Cora said, her voice small and pitiful. This couldn't be happening. This... this wasn't how it was supposed to end.

She thought of the hawk screeching above her, its talons digging into her arms, the whip across her back. *You will never be free.* Something warm trickled down her stomach and she looked down at the red stain blooming on the front of her shirt. Cora touched her chest, her fingers coming away sticky and stained red. The blood poured faster and she fell to her knees, her head spinning. Valdos and Hirasil stood over her, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. She saw instead her mother’s silent suffering, her own hand covering Elda’s mouth. She saw the Fielding slave driver marching them forward, always forward. A race through the trees, her little sister panting and heaving. And always blood, so much blood.

There was a hand around Cora’s upper arm and it hauled her to her feet. Elda stood there, her grip tight, an unfamiliar look of stoic determination on her face. “It’s okay,” her little sister said to her, drawing her into a hug. “You can let go now.”

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In the quiet warmth of the longhouse, Elda sat just where Cora had yesterday when Valdos had kissed her. Now Cora—having pulled herself together—paced back and forth while Valdos warmed a kettle over the hearth, stirring its contents with a large wooden ladle. She was not surprised to see that with the arrival of Elda, the golden slaver's bands had reappeared on her wrists.

“He tried to get me to run,” Elda was saying, her eyes straight ahead, a crease marring her brow.

“Did you?” Cora asked.

“I never would have made it.”

How could Cora have forgotten? How could she have been so foolish? Raenar had returned the day before, blood-thirsty and angry after a disastrous raid. His father, Chief Ienar Hallowtide, had died in the battle, and the raiders had escaped. Raenar had come home full of pent up frustration, only to find his favorite target dead. The fire sizzled around her sister's head. Cora was afraid to hear the rest of the story.

“He built a pyre,” Elda said. “There was a ceremony. I was... an offering.”

Cora stopped pacing. She wanted to go to Elda, to comfort her, but when she looked at her, there were no tears. There was a hardness to the girl's face that Cora had never known before. Valdos brought Elda a mug, but she didn't touch it.

“I want to kill him,” Elda said. “I don't care what happens to me, but I want him dead before he can do this to anyone else. He has to be stopped. If it’s not us, it will be someone else. Someone else’s daughter or sister or friend. This has to end.”

The words rang true to Cora, as true as the ones that the sadj had told her. It felt like a hundred years ago. *Three feathers, plucked from the beating heart of the Crow of Malos—one to cross the river, two to kill the hawk, and three to make a choice.*

Cora turned to where Valdos now stood beside Elda, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His cloak hung by the door, and he wore only a loose undershirt and linen trousers. He saw her looking and offered her a tentative smile which she didn't return. She couldn't let him look at her like that, not with what she had to do next.

“I need your feathers,” Cora said to him.

His brow furrowed over his black eyes. “My what?”

“His what?” Elda chimed in from her spot on the bench.

“Three feathers, plucked from the beating heart of the Crow of Malos,” Cora intoned. “That's how we kill Raenar.”

“He has the crow?” Elda asked.

“He *is* the crow,” Cora replied, not taking her eyes from Valdos. She was angry with herself for forgetting and with him for letting her forget.

“Cora Svanros,” Valdos said, looking as uncomfortable as she had ever seen him, “I think we should talk.”

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Leaving Elda behind with Hirasil, Cora and Valdos walked through town, past the vendors stalls where Val bought her a ripe red fruit, cracking it open so she could eat the sweet seeds hidden within. Following a beaten path up a small rise, they emerged into a clearing dotted with tall grasses and wilting wildflowers. At the edge of the meadow was a cliff. Waves beat against the rocks below. She and Val sat side by side on the edge of the world, legs dangling over the abyss.

“Tell me what the sadj told you,” he finally said.

And so she did, word for word. He listened without looking at her, his eyes cast out over the dark ocean. He reached behind her to pluck a flower and began ripping the black petals off one by one, letting them float away into the air around them. Cora was reminded of the childhood game that girls played to trick themselves into believing in love. *He loves me*, she counted. *He loves me not.*

“I will not survive,” he said. “Malos exists on a delicate balance. If you take those feathers from me, I will become like the shadows, the lost souls. Malos will become more like the horror that it is in the stories your people tell. But I won’t be the monster. Memories will.”

She watched one petal catch a breeze and flutter beyond the others. It hung suspended for a moment before tumbling out of sight. What could she say to that? Could she ask him to sacrifice himself to save so many others? She and her sister were already gone from that world. Couldn’t they just leave it behind?

But then she remembered the ferocity in Elda’s eyes. Raenar had ruined her. He had stolen the hope that had colored all of her words, extinguished the blazing light that had once defined her. Cora had worked so hard and given so much of herself to make sure that Elda was safe. This was the only way to get her back.

She took a black flower from his fingers, and, at her touch, the blossom turned a bright orange-red, the color of Elda’s hair. Val’s laugh was unexpected but surprisingly sweet as he took the flower from her and tucked it behind her ear. He leaned forward and kissed her at the corner of her jaw.

“I will give them to you,” he said, “if you ask. I will sacrifice my dead for your living. He must be stopped, and I believe that you can be the one to do it.”

“Why?” she whispered. “I am nobody.”

“You are Cora Svanros.”

“Stop saying that like it means something.”

He smiled, pulling her to him. “Stop acting like it doesn’t.”

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The waters of the Blatqnn did not appear so tumultuous as before. The whole realm of Malos seemed to be holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

“What if it doesn't work?” Elda asked. She and Cora stood side by side, looking to the western bank, towards Ingfell.

“That doesn't sound like you,” Cora said, nudging Elda with her elbow. The bow and quiver fit perfectly across her little sister's back. Valdos had insisted they take it. One of the arrows had an empty loop in its fletching, where they would string the feather meant to kill the hawk.

“Caw!”

Cora turned as the black crow landed behind them, tucking its wings into its body and ruffling the feathers at its neck. Elda had been warned, but she still took several steps away from the bird. Cora did the opposite, stepping forward so that she was only a few inches away. She wasn't afraid, not anymore.

His feathers were smooth and slick beneath her fingers. She moved her hand until she felt the pulsing of his heart beneath it.

“You don't have to do this,” she whispered. Of course the bird didn't respond, or even move except to turn its head so that she was staring into one black eye. The conversation was already had—she and Elda needed this closure, and the world needed to be rid of Raenar. Cora would never see Valdos again, but it was just one more sacrifice in a whole line of them.

Her fingers found the pulse and she gripped the stems of three feathers, wrapping them in a fist.

“Thank you,” Elda's voice came from just behind her. “Valdos, thank you.”

Cora yanked, and three feathers as long as her arm came free. The animal that was somehow also a man staggered, flapping its wings for balance. Its black beak gaped open as if in surprise. Cora slapped a hand to her mouth to hold back the sob but it came anyway, tears spilling out of her eyes.

“We have to go,” Elda said, pulling her sister from the crow's side.

“Caw!” Valdos cried. *Go!* She thought he was saying.

Cora tucked two of the feathers inside the cloak that she had borrowed from Hirasil, and then held the other one out to her sister. Elda gripped the stem and Cora the softer tip, and together they stepped into the roiling black waters. Cora fought the urge to look back, Valdos’s own voice ringing in her head. *You must always look forward*.

This time, the shadows parted for them as they crossed.

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The sky was so dark, Cora was not entirely sure the crossing had worked until she looked to her sister and saw that the flames had been extinguished. Examining her own chest, she found that the wound had disappeared. There was not even a scar. The feather that they had held between them crumbled into ash and was carried away on the wind.

For the first time ever, Elda led the way back to Ingfell. They no longer had the speed of spirits, so they walked through the entire day without seeing another living soul. It had been so long since Cora had seen the sun that as it rose, she rushed up one of the hills, coming out into the open to watch the sky change from pink to orange to cloudless blue. Standing there, she thought of Valdos and that she would have liked for him to see this. As proud as he had been of his shadow world, there was something about a sunrise that made her heart leap, even knowing what she had done and what she had to do.

The sun was already dipping low again by the time they reached the wheat fields outside Ingfell. While still under the cover of the trees, they stopped and tied the crow's feather to the fletching of one of Valdos's arrows. Before that morning, it had been years since either of the girls had shot an arrow. When Valdos found this small bow in one of his houses, he

had set up a target for them to practice on. They were surprised to find that Elda was the better of the two. After so long protecting her sister from Raenar, Elda would be the one who got to kill him.

By the time they passed through the town's gate, night had fallen again. It seemed only fitting; this was an act meant for the darkness.

"Wait here," Cora instructed her sister, hiding her behind the barn where they had slept for the past eight years. Elda obliged, sinking back into the shadows and pulling the bow from her shoulder.

The sutvithr tree in front of the longhouse was still lush with green leaves. Several branches were weighed down with forms that became clear only as she drew nearer. There were nine bodies hanging from the tree—nine males of different species, but the one closest to her was human. Raenar had been asking the gods for favors. Had his father heard him? Fear pulsed through her, her blood running cold in her veins.

"Cora," came a voice, and a figure stepped out from around the dead man's dangling body. In just a few weeks she had forgotten how big Raenar was, how imposing he could be. And he imposed upon her now, coming closer. She took a step back, then another, hating herself for it but unable to stop. "I hadn't thought to see you again, but it seems the gods have granted me at least this." Something gleamed in his hand—Hauknefr, his prized knife, the one that had taken her first life. He dug beneath his fingernails with it, seeming casual, but she could feel the tension beneath his skin, coiling in his muscles. She knew him by now. After all these years as his slave, as his plaything, as his victim.

"I've come back for you," she said.

Raenar's face twisted into that spiteful smirk he used only when he was gloating. He held his arms out wide, the movement setting the dead man's body to swinging. The branch upon which it hung creaking loudly in the quiet night. "Here I am."

Here you are. Taking hold of her rage, she threw herself at Raenar, hitting him in the middle and knocking him back into the hanging man. They connected with a sickening thud, the knife flying out of his hands and into the darkness. Raenar pushed her off him and she rolled to the side, beneath the dead man's dangling toes, and stood, only to find herself looking into a goat's bulging eyes.

He lunged at her and she danced away, circling the tree, using the bodies as a shield. His knife was gone; all he had were his fists unless he

became the hawk. As awful as it would be to face the bird again, it was what they needed so that Elda could strike.

There was a horse's body hanging nearby, the throat slit, flies buzzing on its glassy eyes. She darted behind it. When Raenar lunged at her, she dug her fingers into the cold flesh and pushed it at him with shaking arms. He leapt backward out of its way. It stayed between them, the rope overhead twisting around itself, the branch creaking.

“Always hiding,” Raenar said, that hateful laughter evident in his voice. “Always running.”

Behind him, Cora saw movement in the shadows—Elda. She held the bow, the string pulled tight. Cora almost cried out to tell her to wait, but when she loosed an arrow and it flew at the rope holding the horse's body, Cora understood. It sliced cleanly through the rope, the heavy corpse crumpling to the ground. Cora and Raenar both dove in opposite directions, but Raenar's leg became stuck beneath the horse's rump. He hollered, struggling to free his trapped leg.

Then it wasn't a man there anymore, but a bird, the hawk limping away from the horse's body. It screamed, and the sound was even worse than Cora remembered. It spoke of anger and pain and death, and it was all directed at Elda instead of Cora. This was not part of the plan.

Elda froze, still not having re-strung the bow. She took a step backwards and tripped over an exposed root, going down hard, the contents of the quiver spilling out beside her. She raised the bow to simply try to protect her face. The hawk leapt, flapping once before it was on her.

“No!” Cora shouted, throwing herself at the bird without hesitation, knocking him sideways. She rolled to her back to face him and something sharp dug into her shoulder. Her fingers searched the dirt and wrapped around Hauknefr's smooth wooden handle just before the hawk attacked again. She thrust it in a sideways arc and it screamed as the blade slashed across its eyes. The bird fell on her, writhing and beating its giant wings, slicing a gash across her face. Pushing it away, she scrambled backward just as she heard the twang of a bow and a second later, an arrow with a black feather in its fletching pierced its heart.

As the life left his body, he changed back into the man, the one she had thought to be unbeatable. But now she knew what unbeatable truly was—it wasn't about who was the strongest or the fiercest. It was about perseverance and hope. There was an angry red gash across his eyes, and

the arrow protruded grotesquely from his chest, buried almost until the fletching. There, Valdos's feather disintegrated, its magic gone.

“What did you do?” Raenar asked, his words muffled by the blood that leaked from his lips, his blind eyes searching for her.

To Cora's surprise, Elda spoke. “I made a choice,” she said, “to not be afraid anymore. To believe in more than *you*.”

Three to make a choice. Though it had been ripped in the fight with Raenar, her cloak was still secure around her shoulders. She reached inside its pocket and felt for the final feather. There it was, waiting for her to choose.

Elda reached down and yanked out the arrow. Blood pulsed from the wound, the color draining from Raenar's face. He looked like he had more to say, but it was only fair that death stole his chance.

A crowd had gathered to watch the spectacle, murmuring amongst themselves now that it was over. The oldest surviving Hallowtide son, Dyri, was the first to step forward from the crowd. Dyri was as big as Raenar, but he was even-keeled and gentle. He moved as if in a daze, his eyes on his brother’s body. There would be no anger there, Cora knew. Raenar had tormented everybody, and with him out of the way, Dyri would be free to claim the territory for his own, and change what needed to be changed.

Before he could approach them, Cora turned to her sister, grasping her hands. “I have to go,” she said.

“What?” Elda asked, tearing her eyes from Raenar's body. She still held the arrow, blood dripping onto the ground between them.

“You made your choice, and now I have to make mine.”

“You know what it means?” Elda asked. They had puzzled over that piece of the sadj's prophecy for the duration of the walk to Ingfell, but had not been able to put anything together. The last feather—*to make a choice*. And then the rest—*I see seven drops of blood and new love's kiss.* She would never know if she didn't try.

Realization dawned on Elda's face, softening the lines that had hardened there since she watched Raenar die. “Go to him.”

Cora hugged her sister close, tears springing into her eyes.

“It’s not goodbye,” Elda reminded her, holding her at arm’s length.

Cora nodded, wiping her eyes. She smiled wryly at her little sister who was not so little anymore, and then turned to run, cutting sideways into the

crowd until she was out of sight.

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The black waters did not scare her anymore. Though, from here, she couldn't see anyone on the other shore, she knew he was there. He had to be. It was only the third day—surely the darkness had not taken him already.

She held the black feather tight in her fist and stepped into the river. It was harder this time, without Valdos or Elda, but the shadows didn't bother her and when she crawled up the opposite bank, the feather fell from her hand into a pile of dust. And there, just as she had suspected, was Valdos's fading body.

Shadows crept up his legs, but he wasn’t gone yet. As exhausted as she was, she forced herself to run the last few yards, dropping to her knees at his side. She leaned over to touch his face. His eyes fluttered open.

“Cora Svanros,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “Why...?”

“I've come back for you,” she said. His eyes closed again. “Val?”

No response. From inside another pocket of her cloak, she pulled out Hauknefr. She had brought the blade all the way from Ingfell. It had helped her defeat Raenar; now it would help her bring back Valdos.

Using the pointed tip, she dug into a blue vein on the underside of her arm. As soon as blood began to well there, she held her arm over Valdos's mouth. A drop fell, sliding along his red lips and disappearing into his mouth. He still didn't respond. Two drops, four, then six. Finally, the seventh drop fell and she pulled her arm back, holding a finger over the puncture wound.

“Val?” she asked. That had to be it. She had made her choice. She had returned to Malos to save him, knowing that she wouldn't be able to go back to Ingfell again. She had given him seven drops of blood, and—

New love's kiss. She had nearly forgotten.

Leaning forward, she brushed her lips against his—warm to cold, living to dead. When his hand snaked through her hair, she nearly choked on her relief.

“Val,” she sobbed. He pushed her away, staring up at her, his black eyes searching hers.

“What have you done?” he asked.

She sat back on her heels, letting him push himself up to sitting. “I still had the last feather and a choice to make, and here I am.”

“Yes,” Val said, shaking the shadows from his limbs and pulling them both to their feet. “Here you are.”

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Cora paced the bank of the Blatqnn. Surely she hadn't miscalculated. Yes, it was hard to judge the passing of time when the sun did not mark the days, but she had been meticulous with her counting. Even Val had woken her up that morning with the words she longed to hear: “Are you going to see Elda today?”

There was one day each year when the two realms almost intersected, when the night was longer than the day and Malos was visible across the Blatqnn. Every year the sisters met there, staying on their opposite banks. Cora had remained the same, a benefit of living in the realm of the never-changing dead, but she had watched her sister grow and mature into a strong woman. Elda had married Chief Dyri Hallowtide after he had abolished the practice of slavery in all Hallowtide territories at her council, and given him three sons. Last year she had been with child again, convinced it was a girl. Cora longed to see her new niece, even if it was at such a great distance.

“Will you be coming with me today?” Cora had asked Val before setting off to the river.

“No,” Val had answered, kissing her on the cheek and fastening her cloak. “There's work to do. Souls to escort.” Cora helped him most days, but not this day. This day was for Elda.

So now she waited alone on the eastern bank, her eyes scanning the darkness, her fingers tracing the smooth edge of the golden band around her wrist. She would never forget, but she didn’t want to anymore. It was a sign of power now, a symbol of her freedom. Below her, shadows slipped in and out of the current. Raenar was down there somewhere, banished by Valdos to the depths of the river, his soul unworthy of a second life.

Finally, three towheaded boys burst from the tree line, wooden swords clacking as they swung at each other.

“Boys!” Cora shouted, tears springing to her eyes. They were so big, so different every year. They paused only briefly to wave at her before continuing their chase through the clearing and along the rise of the bank.

Then Elda emerged, a bundle strapped to her chest with a strip of white cloth. The two waved at each other, grins stretching their mouths. Cora hated the distance and the water that separated them, but it was better than

not seeing her at all. Elda unwound the cloth and presented a redheaded baby in a long gown. A girl.

“What's her name?” Cora called to her sister over the rushing waters of the Blatqnn, the barrier that would stand between them until the natural end of her sister's life.

Elda held a free hand to the side of her mouth to help her words carry. “Hope!” she shouted back. “Her name is Hope!”

The years stretched out before Cora, an endless march of the dead and dying. But there, just across the river, a little girl smiled in her sister’s arms. A little girl who would only wear bands if she chose to, who would be free to choose her own fate, who would grow up safe and loved. Cora felt something swell inside of her. Her name was Hope.

Of course it was.

It never could have been anything else.

Cassidy Taylor is a fantasy author who studied English and Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was there that she found her niche in children’s literature, and won the Bill Hooks Award for Young Adult Fiction in 2007. Her first novel, When Rains Fall, is forthcoming in 2017. She lives in beautiful North Carolina with her husband, two kids, two dogs, and one cat who thinks he’s a dog.

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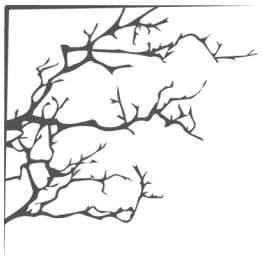

The Forbidden Mirror
J.K. Allen

A LONG TIME AGO THERE lived a kingdom in the shadow of the Great Thorn Palace. It was a small kingdom, poor but self-sufficient, and the royals who lived and ruled there had always been content with their lot. To grow and live in a small piece of pretty land always seemed greater than what the shadows of the Great Thorn Palace portended. That was until the winter sisters were born in the darkest night of winter. Never before had there been two heirs, and those twins, whose cries wailed deep into the frigid night, seemed to settle across the land like a curse.

Though born in almost the same instant and being the same size and shape, they couldn't have been more different. With inky black hair that curled down her slender neck, Raven possessed soulful brown eyes that appraised everything clearly.

Crystal's white blonde hair that she piled high upon her head in elegant braids mimicked the frost, and her grey eyes, full of mirth, reflected back what the seer desired.

In sixteen years, the girls had grown to stately figures. They had one constant companion, good Gestalt—their dearest friend who danced between them like an amiable dog. He would start the day with Raven, painting her a poem where her discerning eye missed nothing. She fed him cookies for each perfect rendition. But to her displeasure he preferred his afternoon's with Crystal, staring into those grey eyes that mirrored his own amorous looks. How could he not understand it was just a trick? Not useful, like Raven's sight.

Raven dreaded staring into her sister's eyes. Like the forbidden mirror, she saw her true desire—to be sovereign queen of their pretty kingdom and restore it to its former glory. She would stare at the image of a golden crown of thorns upon her midnight hair that she would catch in Crystal's eyes. Could Crystal see what she saw? Raven grew on edge but began dreaming of a special coronation. She needed a plan for her dreams to

come true. She knew great power lay in the shadows of the Great Thorn Palace, the forbidden mirror, and the whispers of magic.

The forbidden mirror had caused great pain in the wider world. At first glance, the mirror revealed how to attain what you hold most dear. A second glance revealed at what cost your prize was won. Most never bothered with a second look. Raven knew she never would.

Determination sent Raven out in search of books on the forbidden mirror. She asked her tutors about the Great Thorn Palace and its riddles of mazes, she studied drawings and strategies for solving its convoluted paths. And most importantly, she learned the mirror was guarded, and she would need to bring a gift to the guardian to be shown the mirror. Slowly, piece by piece, a plan began to form.

After morning lessons concluded, she slipped on her cloak and least favorite diadem and grabbed her pack. It held the guardian's gift and her father's pocket watch. Her horse, Lightning, was saddled and waiting. She rushed to the stables unseen, slinking past the servants in the hall and on the grounds with quiet, careful steps. She couldn't fail here, just when she was beginning to make her dreams come true, so she slipped through the shadows to Lightning's side. The Great Thorn Palace would be half a day's ride.

The dappled light of the forest danced across her face, as her black hair trailed behind her. A soft breeze kept her brow cool, and she enjoyed the pleasant ride. Was it a good omen for her mission? She smiled indulgently at the thought.

Soon the forest gave way to bramble that thickened, twisting itself into knots. Sharp thorns jutted out from the scrambling vines to block out the sun. She slowed her steed, her heart racing staccato beats in her chest. But she was prepared, and she was determined. She would make the better queen. And wouldn't that also make her the better wife? If that meant betraying her sister, so be it. Hopping down from her mount, she faced the Great Thorn Palace.

The walls were woven of the same thorns that created the maze. But they were bleached white, like old bone, rising into the sky so that Raven had to crane her neck to see the tops of the towers. The palace was at least ten times the size of her home and the maze unwound to countless turns behind it.

Raven walked into the palace with impatient steps and down a turn of hallways to where the forbidden mirror was said to rest. When she entered the silent room, she saw a huge red curtain on the far wall and the guardian of the mirror—a peacock with indigo plumes that shimmered behind him. He looked at her demurely before turning to face her with an impish smile, feathers fanning.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve had a visitor” Peacock trilled. He sauntered around her, keeping her in his sights.

“Are all visitors unwelcome? Surely some are not,” she replied with a smile.

“Which ones would those be?”

“The ones who bring you a gift.”

“A gift?” Peacock raised a brow and gave her a slow smile.

“Beauty for beauty,” Raven said, opening her pack. She withdrew a large sapphire—her only gemstone given to her from matronly Aunt Delores.

“It is my favorite color,” he purred. “I trust you know the effects of the mirror?”

“Of course. I only require one look.”

The peacock nodded his head, taking his time as he looked her over. “If you know the consequences, I will let you look into the mirror in exchange for this gift. What you do with the mirror, I leave to you.”

He drew aside the red curtain to reveal the treasure she sought. The mirror was gilded, with blood red garnets arranged in an ornate pattern around it. Though she could only tell from up close, the glass was not made of glass—every reflection gleamed low and soft upon the metal set in its place.

Raven rushed toward the mirror, watching her figure grow larger in the frame. She fell to her knees and looked, her lips parted in a smile and her eyes wide. There she was in the mirror, but a new man approached and spoke to her. She gave him something from her pack and followed him.

Then they were deep within the thorny maze. A glimmer caught her eye, and she turned to see something shimmering in a glass box. She took it and left her diadem in its place. Then she departed with the golden thorn crown upon her head.

Raven felt giddy just watching the pantomime in the mirror. Could this be the way she would rise to power? Could it be this very day?

“I trust you’ve had your glance in my mirror,” Peacock said, grabbing her attention.

She stood and faced him. “I have seen my dreams answered.”

“You are entitled to one more look.”

“No, nothing will prevent me from my destiny. The cost is a trifle, nothing more.”

He nodded. “Then you will be interested in what my compatriot has to say.”

A tall, lean man entered the room. Antlers curled up from his blond hair and he gave her a low bow.

“I have been waiting for you, my dear.” He took her hand in his and kissed her palm.

“And you would be?” Raven asked with a smile.

“I am the keeper of the Great Thorn Palace,” he said with a mischievous grin. “Just as you gifted Peacock with a fitting token to be shown the mirror, I too can be gifted with a token.”

“A token for?”

“The secret magic of the Palace hidden inside the maze.” He winked. “Will you follow me within?”

Raven took off her pack and rummaged within. As she pulled something out into the open, she held it out to him, “All I have is my father’s gold pocket watch.”

“I will accept this.” He took the watch from her. “Now follow me.”

He led her through the maze of thorns that twisted and turned until Raven was hopelessly lost without her guide. She could only see the sky above the fifteen-foot-tall towering walls of thorn.

As she looked around her, the man walked out of sight. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she walked faster. A tendril snaked out and twisted around her leg. Another branch shot out, a bramble of thorns wrapping around her skirt. Her heart jumped into her throat. If she couldn’t find the guide, she’d never make it out of the maze. Despite the prickles, she ripped the thorn branch from her dress, tearing fabric off. Bending down, she wrestled with the tendril working its way up her leg. With impatient hands she ripped it free and ran after him.

She ran past more plants that tried to ensnare and trip her. After a couple sharp turns, she found him waiting for her.

“Take care you don’t get lost,” was his quiet admonition.

She tried to catch her breath as she followed him again. As she calmed, a vicious snarl drifted in from the right. Inside a dark corner of the maze she saw a huge wolf approaching. He snarled again, teeth bared and hackles raised. Her heart pounded in her ears. She had not prepared for this.

A voice came from behind her and she turned. “I am forbidden to fight the beasts of the maze, but I can offer you this,” the guide said, handing her a ruby encrusted dagger. The wolf slinked toward her, growling deeper. It bit at her feet and she fled, straight into the thorn wall on the other side of the path. Thorns bit into the soft flesh of her arms and face. She turned to confront the wolf. He crouched, ready to pounce. Raven knew it was time to fight or die. The wolf lunged; she held the dagger up and out, impaling the beast’s neck. She threw the heavy creature off her, ripping the dagger from its throat.

“I believe this is yours,” she said, wiping the blade on the wolf’s hide before handing it back to the guide.

He smiled. “It’s just a little farther.”

They walked through several more twists and turns with the thorn walls growing taller and closer together. If she wasn’t with the guide, those thorns would attack and ensnare her—she was certain of it.

Finally her guide halted. Encased in a glass box, Raven saw a golden scepter. The top was shaped like a crown, with a heart in the center and a ring of thorns encasing it all. She reached for it with eager fingers, but the man stopped her just short of her goal.

“You must give to receive—to tie the magic to your kingdom.” He withdrew his hand.

But she had come prepared for that. She removed her diadem and placed it where the scepter lay, just like she had seen in the mirror. Then she grasped the scepter.

Power thrummed through her. It was an indescribable pleasure. Her heart raced with excitement and she felt a warmth growing in her chest.

“How does it work?” she asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“If you can imagine it, you can do it.”

She closed her eyes and imagined she was flying. A wind rustled her hair and she was swept into the air without warning. Her stomach dropped and her eyes rushed open. Raven could hardly believe she kept floating higher and higher. Laughter bubbled from her lips as the thorn hedges

grew smaller. Pausing, she rested on top of a breeze, looking around her. Her home sat in the distance and she could see the full expanse of the maze's growth. After a few minutes she floated down.

"Thank you for leading me here," she said to her guide. "I will leave you now."

With a single thought, she appeared outside the maze next to Lightning. A light neighing greeted her, and she smiled to see her ride home. The kingdom was hers alone. With the scepter's power, she could rule the world. She raced the oncoming twilight back to her castle.

"Raven, where have you been, and what's that you're holding?" Crystal's voice reached her from the throne room.

When she entered the room, she found her sister alone. "It's my royal scepter. You will address me as Queen or Your Majesty from now on." Raising it, she forced her sister to kneel. She couldn't hold back her laughter as she watched her sister struggle to stand.

Gestalt appeared and ran towards them. "What in the world is going on?"

"I am queen now, Gestalt. I know I won't have to force you to kneel."

"What makes you queen? You and your sister are equals."

"We were never equals," she shouted, holding the scepter high. "And now I am all powerful. I am queen and I will not share my throne." Her voice echoed through the chamber. "Now, sister dear, you will proclaim me as your queen."

"You can't make me," she squealed. With that challenge, Raven picked Crystal up by her foot, shaking her upside down. But then Gestalt crashed into her and knocked her to the floor. She held onto her scepter, but lost her hold on her sister and Crystal fell.

"How dare you?" Crystal screamed, rising and rushing to attack Raven, her face a mottled red. Crystal raked her nails down Raven's face, who shrieked and held her scepter high. She brought it down as hard as she could, landing a heavy blow on her sister's head. With a whimper, Crystal fell to her knees, then slumped to the ground. Her eyes were open but no longer saw. Gestalt ran to Crystal screaming.

"What have you done?" he screeched as Raven tried to swallow past the lump in her throat.

"I didn't mean to," she mumbled, but he wasn't listening. He shook Crystal, begging her to wake up. Raven screwed her eyes shut and tried to

imagine her sister was fine—tried to imagine she was alive and well, that she sat up and laughed at them both. But no matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't bring Crystal back to life.

She opened her eyes and took a step towards Gestalt and her sister.

"Stay away from us," he screamed, tears streaming down his face. She couldn't stand the look of disgust he gave her.

Raven was queen, but perhaps she wasn't willing to pay any price.

Julia Allen received her BA in Creative Writing and English from Michigan State University. She did her senior thesis in poetry under the tutelage of Diane Wakoski, but has been focused primarily on fiction as of late. Common writing themes that can be found in her work address identity and the type of strength that can be found in ordinary people. Julia is currently working on a Young Adult fiction novel and can be found at local cafes in her hometown when writing, and painting, drawing, or reading when not.

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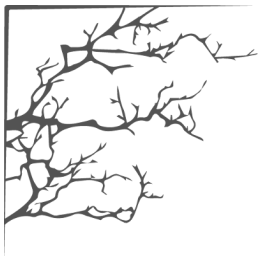

Selkie Cove
Paul Stansbury

CECELIA PUSHED THROUGH the screen door of the Selkie Cove Inn as the cab rambled off down the gravel road, kicking up white dust. It had only taken a morning to see all there was to see in Pinniped Harbor. She had come with James on his business trip, hoping to break the monotony of their life/her life. Perhaps a spark to rekindle anything that resembled romance or adventure. She was desperate for a change—any change. A deep resentment of her drab existence had been growing inside. *What do I do now?*

The rusty return spring creaked, speaking to the building's age and condition. *Just like me.* More a bed and breakfast, the inn was simply an old house with a dining room and parlor on the first floor and three guest bedrooms on the second. The inn's saving grace was a grand view of Selkie Cove from the porch, just off the parlor. As far as Cecelia could tell, this modest concave indent in the shoreline was pristine, nothing to spoil the view, not even a tie-up for a skiff could be seen.

The innkeeper, Mrs. Merman, was a dour woman who Cecelia guessed to be in her 80's. "Find lots of pretties to buy?" the woman asked.

"Well the shops were full, to be sure," Cecelia answered, "but I only picked up some cards with a pen and ink sketch of the village. Maybe I'll go back tomorrow and find a nice souvenir to take home."

"Got plenty of postcards right here," Mrs. Merman countered, pointing to a rack of cheesy photo postcards featuring fishing boats and historic churches.

"Well, perhaps I'll send a card or two to some friends before we leave."

"Suit yourself, they're already stamped, buck each or five for four fifty. You can drop 'em off at the desk before three, and they'll go out with the afternoon mail."

“Thanks,” Cecelia said in response to the gruff offer. “What I was wanting to do now is take a walk along the shore. Can you suggest the best way for me to go?”

“I can try to explain it to you, but the best thing is to buy a tour map which’ll show you all the trails. You can take it with you so as not to get lost. Only a buck – to cover the cost, you see,” explained Mrs. Merman.

Cecelia gave in to the inevitable and plopped a dollar down on the counter. The old lady opened the cash register drawer and pulled out a single sheet of green paper containing a line drawing of the cove. She laid it out on the counter. Cecelia studied the crude drawing for a minute.

“If you ask me,” Mrs. Merman interjected, “I’d recommend the Serenity Trail, if you’re lookin’ to go down to the water’s edge. Not too steep and the shore is purty smooth where it comes out. Now, if you want a good look out to sea, head along the Lookout Trail. It runs up along the cliff to its highest point.”

She traced the routes out with a gnarled finger. “Got a bench to sit on and you’ll be able to see the boats comin’ in. Wouldn’t try that Adventure Trail, though. Don’t know why I even put it on the silly map. Awful steep and the coastline is very rocky where it comes out. Can’t see much up that away ‘cause of the cliff.” She pushed the map toward Cecelia. “No, I wouldn’t recommend it at all. Could be treacherous for a purty young thing like you. Better safe than sorry.”

Cecelia repeated the words in her mind. *Better safe than sorry.* That summed up her approach to life and what was weighing so heavily on her mind. She felt everything she had ever done was safe. She had never really tested the boundaries – always played it safe- stayed at home, got a teaching degree instead of studying marine biology, married a hometown boy with a good job at the local factory instead of taking a year to travel in Europe. None of that was necessarily wrong, but she sometimes felt she was letting life pass her by.

“Thanks,” she said, picking up the map. “I think I’ll just head out and see where I end up.”

“One more thing, dearie,” added the old woman, “the sun sets fast ‘round here, real fast. The dark sneaks up on you an’ you’ll be in the shadows before you know it and that’s when you don’t want to be down along the water. The shadows can play mean tricks on you. No, best not be

caught down there at dusk. Not telling you what to do or nothin', just a friendly warning so's to speak."

"Thanks, again," Cecelia said, "OK to leave my things here?"

"Whatever suits you. Just set 'em on the chair and I'll keep an eye on 'em."

Cecelia stuffed her purse in her shopping bag and placed it on the chair, then folded the map and stowed it in her pocket. She walked out onto the porch and surveyed her options. *Better safe than sorry?* The Adventure Trail lay straight ahead. *Maybe things will change. Perhaps this trip will signal a new beginning.* She picked her way down the steep path and soon reached the shore. Although the trail twisted through a steep crevice as it descended, it came out directly below the inn at the center of the cove's wide arc. Looking back up the bluff, she realized just how far above the water the inn was situated. The water surged upon the shore. The soft shrushing she had heard from the porch now swelled in her ears, almost drowning out the calls of the seagulls. The odor of fish, salt, and seaweed filled her head.

Just as Mrs. Merman had described, the shore to her right got progressively flatter as it ran out to the distant point. Pinniped Harbor lay just beyond. To her left, the shore receded into a jumble of sea-scoured rocks and boulders until it ended in a sheer cliff.

Cecelia contemplated her next move. *Right or left? Vanilla or rocky road?* She pulled the map from her pocket, studying it a moment. She turned to the left. A surge of cold Atlantic water rolled over her sneakers. She jumped back instinctively. Too late. Her feet were soaked. She stared at them as if they belonged to someone else, then giggled. *Mrs. Merman was right, these are indeed treacherous waters. Sometimes, you can't have an adventure without getting something wet.* Cecelia walked along the shoreline, picking her way among the rocks, occasionally holding out her arms for balance, like a tightrope walker. She had spied a column of rock jutting up from the rubble and decided to try to make it at least that. The uneven, slippery rocks required her to keep her eyes glued on her feet, limiting her opportunities to look ahead. She paused, peering into the clear pools of water at her feet. Examining the creatures within, she regretted not becoming a marine biologist.

She had just finished watching a small hermit crab disappear into a forest of waving sea weed when she looked up to see a man at the water's

edge just ahead. He stood motionless, facing the ocean. Cecelia was so startled she almost lost her balance, one foot stepping backward into an ankle deep pool of water. Even though she let out a loud yelp, the man did not move. She looked for any sign that he was aware of her presence. *Surely he heard me. Where did he come from? Isn't he standing where the column of rock should be? Has he been there all the time and I mistook him for a rock?* She continued to look at him, but could detect no movement. All the time, she had worked her way along the shore, she had kept her eye on that rock as a reference point. She had seen it clearly in the sunlight when she started out. Now, the twilight crept out from the cliff base. *Maybe it was an optical illusion.* She remembered the old lady's words: 'The shadows can play mean tricks on you.'

Cecelia continued to move along, keeping one eye on the rocks at her feet and one on the man. *Should I turn back? Better safe than sorry, or was it safe and sorry?* She felt drawn toward the man, her feet seeming to move on their own. He still had not moved. She stopped as she reached a large flat stone. Able to relax, she took the time to take a good look. His deep, gentle brown eyes, which she could now clearly see, stared resolutely over the water. The plain, loose fitting clothes of a fisherman covered his frame but did not hide his muscular build. His complexion spoke of a life spent outdoors, yet without a blemish or the ruddy hue of a fisherman. Thick, close-cropped black hair covered his head. He had fine features. As he turned his head to look at her, she detected an amiable smile on his lips. Cecelia found him altogether handsome. Finally, she managed the courage to speak.

"Good afternoon, I was just walking along the shore." *How stupid did that sound?*

"A fine afternoon it is," he said, as easy and comfortable as if they had known each other for a long time. "Few folk are brave enough to venture this rocky shore. Especially a young woman such as yourself. I don't think you make your home in these parts. Am I right?"

"I'm a guest at the inn," Cecelia responded, pointing up toward the bluffs.

"Yes, that would have been my guess."

"I'm Cecelia," she said, extending her hand. She realized too late that she was standing too far away to reach his hand.

“I‘d love to shake your hand, but I’ve a mild aversion to getting my boots wet. You will forgive me.”

Cecelia looked at the man and realized that he was standing just back from the water’s edge. The rocks beneath his feet were dry as a bone. She hopped twice and joined him.

“Now, I’ll gladly take that hand,” he said smiling. “I’m Dylan.”

“Glad to meet you, Dylan,” Cecelia returned, extending her hand once again, “I’m here because I took the Adventure Trail.” He accepted her hand with a firm but gentle grip and she was immediately put at ease. He had a subtle smell of spice and the sea about him.

“You do strike me as the adventurous type – the kind of woman who takes risks on a regular basis. You do have that look of danger about you.”

“Well, not that often,” she replied.

“A woman not afraid of getting wet, I would say,” he said looking at her feet.

“And you a man afraid of getting something wet, perhaps,” she giggled, pointing toward Dylan’s boots.

“On the contrary, Cecelia, I would very much enjoy that,” he said, his voice taking on a pensive air. A moment of silence passed between them. Finally, he said, “So you have set your course for adventure.”

“Yes.”

“Rather than the safe route?”

“You could say that. Perhaps it was only because the innkeeper was so insistent I take the easier trail. I don’t know, but here I am.” She was growing more comfortable with each exchange. “I didn’t expect to meet anyone.”

“Have I spoiled your afternoon?”

“Oh no, it’s just ....”

Obviously perturbed, Dylan spoke up. “Just that you weren’t expecting to meet anyone. Neither was I. Your innkeeper friend has done a fair job of scaring folk away from here, what with her talk of treacherous shores and shadows at dusk. Has she made up any other tales to tell?”

Cecelia was thrown off track by Dylan’s comment. He was still holding her hand and she pulled back, but he did not relinquish his grip. “First of all, she is not my friend. I’m just staying there for a couple of days with my husband, James.” *Why did I mention James...? Why shouldn’t I?* She

realized she had been flirting like a schoolgirl. Her cheeks grew hot. Embarrassed, she wondered if Dylan could see her blushing.

“Forgive me, Cecelia,” he said, releasing her hand, “it’s just that she and I have a long history, most of which is bitter.”

“Well, I am sorry about all that, but it’s hardly a concern for me. As I said, I’m only here a short while and regardless of what I think about Mrs. Merman or you, I don’t think it’s a good thing to get involved in other peoples’ troubles. Nothing against you, but you can appreciate where I’m coming from, can’t you?”

“Of course, I can respect that, Cecelia. It’s just that I sensed you were an adventurer, someone who would take a risk to help someone in need. Someone such as me.”

“Me, help you? I don’t think so. Besides, that’s not me. This has been more excitement than I’ve had in five years.”

“But you long for it, don’t you?

“Just an idle fancy. I’m really a coward at heart. I may dream about such things, but taking the Adventure Trail down to the beach is about my limit”

The shadows grew longer, creeping over rocks and into the water. He gazed intently at her, reaching out his hand.

“Please, hear me out. I would not ask if I could do this on my own, but as it is, I am forever cursed unless I can find someone to help me. Few come this way and I can‘t let any opportunity slip past. Just hear me out.”

This man is dangerous. I should leave. She could feel her resistance fading. The more she looked at him, the more beautiful he seemed and the more she was drawn to him. She stepped forward, heart racing. Dylan lifted his hand and caressed her face. His touch dazzled her senses.

In an instant, she was no longer standing on the rocky beach. Naked, she glided through the water, Dylan at her side. Her body tingled with excitement. They swam through the water effortlessly, bodies undulating through the waves until they came to an island. They pulled themselves from the water and lay on the soft sand. The sun warmed her body. She rolled to her side to embrace Dylan.

“Forgive me.” The sound of Dylan’s voice startled her. She was once again standing in the shadows on the rocky shore of the cove. Her knees buckled and Dylan quickly grasped her, preventing a fall to the rocks. Cecelia’s head reeled. *What just happened?*

“A Selkie trick. A glimpse of what could be. Unfair perhaps, but necessary in my situation. How else could I convince you to listen to me?” Cecelia tried to pull away from Dylan, but he held her close. “Leave me now if you choose, I will not prevent it. No more Selkie intrigue. I promise.”

“Selkie? Like in Selkie Cove? Is it named after your family” Cecelia asked. *What am I doing? This is ridiculous. No good can possibly come from this. Better safe than sorry. Better safe than sorry? If I go back now it will be safe from here on. If I stay . . .*

“In a manner. Shall I explain?” he asked.

Cecelia nodded, not sure what to expect.

“What I will tell you may sound like the sad ramblings of a madman. I assure I’m not mad and what you are about to hear is real and true. You must be willing to suspend your reliance on every safe thing you have been told, and accept that there are things that exist in this world that defy your common beliefs.”

“Is this going to get weird?” *It already has!*

“We Selkie are an ancient race of shape shifters. Our usual appearance is that of a seal, but we sometimes come to land and shed our sealskin to take human form. We roam about freely for up to seven days before we must return to the sea. There is, however, one thing we fear. A sealskin, lost or stolen, dooms a Selkie to remain in human form until it can be recovered. After seven days, a Selkie can touch neither sea nor earth unless it marries a human and accepts the shelter of a human abode. Otherwise, the only place it can remain is on solid rock. Thus stranded, in the light of day or in the dark of night, a selkie must take the form of stone. Only at dawn and dusk, when the world is between day and night, can the Selkie retake its human form, but it must remain on rock. Why risk such a fate? The sensations we experience in human form are quite pleasurable. For that reason, even though we realize the danger, the lure of a frolic in human form is often too much to resist. Usually, we seek out quiet places far from humankind and the troubling complications that often come with contact. Nonetheless, the occasional interaction with a human is inevitable.”

“So you want me to believe you are a seal in fisherman’s clothing? I think I better go.” She pulled back, but he kept her in his grasp.

“Wait, please hear me out. By human standards, Selkie are quite attractive. Selkie females are comely, both in appearance and manner. It is said that a man having seen one cannot bear to let her go. Believing a Selkie female to be a good wife, men will sometimes hide or destroy her sealskin, leaving her no option but to marry them. And though selkie females make good wives, there is always a sadness in their eyes and a chill in their heart, for they forever long to return to the sea.

“Selkie males are rogues, known for their ability to beguile unsuspecting and unsatisfied women. They will sometimes venture out to find unsatisfied women for a tryst, lasting perhaps a night, perhaps longer, but always to return to the sea afterward. And that, I am embarrassed to admit, describes me.”

“So you climb out of the sea and ravish beautiful women. That’s some pickup line. I’m sure a lot of women fall for that, but not me.” Cecelia pulled back, but could not look away from his eyes.

“Sixty years ago, I climbed the bluff to the house above. There, I met a young woman. Callously, I used my powers to beguile her and she gave herself to me. As she slept, I stole away to rest on the shore before returning to the sea. When dawn came, I awoke to find my skin was missing. Frantically, I searched, but could not find it. I looked up toward the bluff and could see her looking down on me. I realized she must have taken my skin. I rushed up the hill, demanding she return it. She said she would never give it up. She wanted me for her husband. I refused. She then said if she could not have me, then neither could land or sea. For six days, she stood fast, while I searched and searched. Just before dawn on the seventh day, I returned to this spot and awaited the sun.

Something in his eyes made Cecelia want to believe his wild story. “Why not marry her then? Surely it would have been better than this?”

“We don’t make good husbands,” replied Dylan. “I told her as much, not that it made any difference. For many years, she would come to me at dusk, demanding I marry her. Always, I refused. Then one day, she came to say she had married. I thought she might release me. That was not the case. She said from that time forward, she would never set foot on the cove. She said she would keep my skin so I would long for it as she had longed for me. From that day, I have only seen her at the top of the bluff, never on these rocks. I know she still lives in the house above, and I know she still has my skin.

“This all must sound too fantastic to be true, but you have to believe me. You must help me. Find my skin and return it to me. Please. I know what I did was wrong, but have I not paid a full price for my indiscretions?”

“I don’t know,” Cecelia stammered. “This is so ... so ... I don’t know. I can’t. I mean I don’t know.” *Damn.*

Dylan touched her cheek. She calmed down. “Time is short, dusk is upon us and my time is limited. You must go now, keep your mind open and you will know what I have told you is true. You must believe. Now go.” He drew back his hand. Cecelia looked into his eyes. She could see the desperation in them.

“I’ll try.” *What am I saying? I ought to get the hell out of here and never look back.*

“That is all I can ask. Now go. Hurry.”

Cecelia hesitated for a moment, searching for something to say, something to give voice to the conflicting emotions that roiled in her soul. Unable to say anything, she left, picking her way among the tangled rocks in the waning light. She looked back and saw only the column of rock. She made it back up the bluff just as full darkness engulfed Selkie Cove.

After supper, Cecelia moved into the parlor to relax on the faded chesterfield. Mrs. Merman had a fire burning. On the hearth, a large carved seal lounged, the black paint on its nose rubbed away from the loving pats of the guests over the years. It was not a particularly cool evening, but after the happenings of the day, Cecelia found the fire comforting. Mrs. Merman made a busy noise clearing dishes from the dining room. That soon gave way to the faint clattering of wash work in the kitchen, punctuated by the shrill whistle of a teapot. Eventually, all went quiet and the old woman, carrying a small tray with a teapot and cups, came into the parlor.

Cecelia tried to imagine her as a young woman in the passionate embrace of the handsome man from the cove. She was uncomfortable with the image, like the first time she connected the dots and tried to picture her mother and father making love. It was also difficult to imagine the old woman harboring such rancor toward him through the years. *Is his story true, or a fantastic ruse to beguile another unsuspecting woman?*

“Tea, dearie?” the old woman asked.

“Uh ...” Cecelia stammered, thoughts interrupted midstream, “thanks, but no. It might keep me up. This is a wonderful mantle,”

“Yes, it is. My father laid these stones,” Mrs. Merman explained. “Packed them up by hand from the base of the cliff. Used the same path you took today. He built this house, too. I’ve lived here all my life. I was still a child when he died. My mother had to take in boarders to pay the bills. When she passed, I took over and turned it into an inn.”

“It’s beautiful,” Cecelia said.

“What’s that, dearie?” the old woman asked, looking up from her cup of tea.

“The seal,” Cecelia said, pointing toward the fireplace.

“You mean Dylan. Yes, yes, he is indeed a handsome specimen isn’t he?”

Dylan? “Your seal is named Dylan?” she blurted in astonishment.

“That’s what I said. Did you get some sand in your ears during your little adventure today?”

“No, I just didn’t expect a seal to be named Dylan.”

“He was a wedding present. My fiancé was a woodcarver. Before we married, he said he wanted to carve something special for me for our wedding day. He asked what I wanted and I told him my heart’s desire was a seal. I told him it was just what I needed to dress up the parlor. He carved the beautiful creature you see here, for me. So from that point on, I had a husband and Dylan. He has been with me ever since, the seal, that is. My husband, God rest his soul, died some years ago.”

“His head is turned to the cove. D’you think he longs to return to the sea?” asked Cecelia.

“He is where he is supposed to be,” the old woman said sternly, leaning forward in her chair. “Sitting right there on those stones. He has all his needs and wants right there.”

Cecelia was surprised by the old woman’s sharp reaction. The conversation came to an awkward halt and the two sat in silence. She stared into the flames with heavy eyes. The seal’s head seemed to nod in the flickering light. Soon her own head was nodding.

“If you will excuse me, Mrs. Merman, I think I’ll head upstairs and wait for James in my room.”

“You go ahead dearie. There’s a guest pantry just over there,” she cooed, lifting a bony finger from her cup in the direction of the front desk.

“There’s drinks, ice and other goodies if you get hungry during the night, or day, for that matter. The prices are posted. We use the honor system, just write down what you got along with a room number and we’ll settle up at checkout.”

‘Thanks, I doubt I’ll need anything after tonight’s fish chowder, but James may be hungry when he gets in. I’ll let him know.”

“Well, sleep tight, dearie.”

Cecelia trudged up the stairs to her room. Images of the day’s events swirled through her head as she prepared for bed. She plopped down on the mattress, fully intending to wait up for James. She fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Bits and pieces of dreams danced through her mind as she slept. They coalesced into a clear image. She was standing on the rocky shelf at the base of the cliff below the inn. A late morning sun shone down. She felt the warmth of the rock wall behind her. A twenty foot swath of jumbled rocks stretched in front of her to the water. Almost at the water’s edge, a large seal lay on its belly, facing the sea. She watched as it slowly raised its head, looking to the sky. Up and up the seal stretched, arching its back until she thought surely it would break. A pink line appeared at the base of the seal’s neck and slowly ran up its head and down its straining back. The ebony sheath slipped easily to either side, revealing pink skin. It continued to peel away, revealing a man who stood erect in the sun, arms raised toward the sky. He stepped out of the membrane which encircled his feet. His athletic body glistened in the light. Dropping to one knee, he gathered the pelt, folded it into a compact bundle and laid it to the side. He prized up a flat rock, scooped out the sand and gravel to form a depression. In this, he placed his bundle, then placed the rock over it. As his body dried in the soft breeze, a rich tone replaced the baby pink of his newborn skin. Raven hair had sprouted and covered his head. He stood up and turned toward the cliff...

Dylan. Cecelia bolted up from her sleep, heart pounding. Adrenalin tingled through her body. She put her arms down to steady herself in the soft mattress. One fell on James. She held her breath, trying not to tremble. She waited a moment to see if she had awakened him. He did not move. She watched him for a moment. He was the safe decision. *What am I to do?* Convinced he was asleep, she eased out of bed, tapping her feet lightly around on the floor for her slippers. Finding them, she slipped her

feet in, plucked her nightgown from the bedpost, and pulled it over her head. A sliver of dim light from the hall revealed where the door stood. She inched her way through the darkness, holding her arms out until her fingers made contact with it. She flipped the lock and crept out into the hall. She picked her way down the steps, placing her feet close to the sides, hoping to keep the creaks and groans to a minimum. Once at the bottom, she went directly into the parlor.

The fire was burning low, but still shed enough light to allow Cecelia to navigate the parlor. She knelt down in front of the carving, now an ink blot against the red glow of the dying embers. She stared at it for the longest time. *What am I doing? Has this all been a dream?* She reached out. Her fingers touched the surface, still warm from the heat of the fireplace. She ran her hand along its softly curving form, feeling its smoothness. Grasping the seal with both hands, she hefted it from the hearth and set it on the floor next to her. Its weight almost pulled her over. She leaned forward and examined the hearth. All the fireplace stones were joined tight with mortar except for the one on which the carving had rested. Here, she found a fine line of separation. Where it met the upright stones of the surround, there was just enough space to allow her to wrap her slender fingers around its edge. She tugged up on the stone, revealing a compartment beneath. Perhaps the old woman's father had devised it as a repository for valuables. She peeked inside. Cecelia's heart pounded. There lay a greyish bundle. *Can this really be?* She removed it, then carefully lowered the stone back into place. Rocking back on her heels, she held the silky sealskin tightly to her chest, stroking its fine fur with her hands. Tears welled in her eyes.

Cecelia took care to set the parlor back in good order, insuring that no trace of her activities would be noticed. She lay awake, unable to quell the thoughts and images that swirled in her head. When James got up, she pretended to be asleep and remained in bed until the morning sunlight began to fill the room. She dressed and went down to the dining room for the continental breakfast.

"Sleep well?" Mrs. Merman asked, placing a glass of orange juice on the table.

"Yes."

"Thought I heard someone moving around in the wee hours."

“Oh, uh, I did wake up and came down to see if I could find something to help me get back to sleep.”

“Did you?”

“What?”

“Find what you were looking for?”

“I think so. Anyway, I made it back to bed.” Cecelia took a sip of the orange juice to wet her drying throat. “I’d like to go back into the village. I saw something in a shop yesterday that I want to buy. Would you call the cab for me? I’ll be back after lunch.”

“Suit yourself, dearie.”

Cecelia gave the cabbie directions to a small shop she had visited the day before. Finding it, she hurried inside to make her purchase. Then, she strolled around, biding time, stopping only long enough to eat lunch. About two, she called for a cab.

Cecelia did not see Mrs. Merman when she got back to the inn. Relieved, she went straight up to her room and made her preparations. The afternoon was slipping away when she came back down the stairs.

Mrs. Merman was behind the front desk. She eyed Cecelia. “Going on a trip, dearie?”

“What’s that?”

“Your gunny sack there,” the old woman declared, pointing to the backpack in Cecelia’s hand. “Mighty fancy. All packed and ready to go.”

“Well, you never know,” she said, slipping her arms through the straps. “Haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“What ya’ got inside?” the old woman pried.

“Oh, just something to slip on. Just in case.”

“Just in case of what?”

“Well, just in case I decide it needs slippin’ on I guess. Won’t know ‘til I get where I’m going.”

“Where’s that?”

“Down to the cove, for starters. After that, you never know.”

“Getting’ late in the day. Not much light left.”

“It’ll be enough.”

“Best be careful. Like I told you yesterday, you’re apt to run into things ‘round here that can be mighty treacherous. Things ain’t always what they seem. Folks has taken the wrong path before and paid for it dearly. Better safe than sorry, I say.”

“I believe you, Mrs. Merman. Truly I do. But as you say, daylight is burning, so with your leave, I’ll be on my way.”

“Need a map?”

“Got one yesterday,” Cecelia chirped. “Anyway, I think I know which way I’ll be going.”

“Suit yourself.”

Cecelia bounded out the door and headed straight to the Adventure Trail. She quickly worked her way down, feet hopping from stone to stone. Once on the rocks at the bottom of the cove, she made a beeline for the column of rock. She paid little mind to the water, soaking both feet as she scrambled to her destination. Shadows still clung close to the cliff’s edge when she arrived. *Good. Time left to get things ready.*

Cecelia slipped the backpack off her shoulders and set it on the rocks at her feet. She looked up to gauge the shadows as they crept out from the cliff toward the water. Soon they would fall on the column of rock. Unzipping the bag, she reached in and pulled out a blanket. Underneath was the sealskin. She had hidden it in her luggage last night after bringing it up from the parlor. Knowing she couldn’t leave the inn with a suitcase, the backpack was the perfect solution. Soon, she had removed enough rocks from the shore’s gravel and sand to spread out the blanket.

The shadows had reached the base of the column. It would not be long before Dylan appeared. Cecelia looked around the shore and up along the cliff. No one was in sight. It didn’t matter, for she was now committed. She untied her shoes and kicked them off. Then she pulled off her tee-shirt and unfastened her jeans, allowing them to fall to her feet. Before she left the inn, she had removed her bra and panties. She retrieved the sealskin from the backpack replacing it with her clothes. Gathering it to her bare breasts, her whole body tingled. She dropped to one knee, arranging it on the blanket with the back slit open.

She stood up. Dylan had appeared.

“Cecelia, you have found it!” he exclaimed. He eyed her standing on the blanket. A smile appeared on his lips. “I knew you would make the right decision. As I said, you strike me as the adventurous type – a woman to take a risk. There is a look of danger about you. It suits you.” His eyes searched the cove and the cliff above.

“I’ve already looked, there is no one around to interrupt,” she assured.

“A woman not afraid of getting wet,” he said, gazing at her naked body.

“A woman not afraid. I’ve made my decision.”

Dylan cast off his coat and quickly unbuttoned his shirt. He began to tug at his boots when he saw Cecelia step into the slit of the sealskin.

“No! No!” he screamed, reaching out in desperation.

“Too late,” Cecelia cried, the sealskin moving up her legs as she knelt down. “I think the Selkie life will suit me well.”

Dylan watched as the sealskin glided over her shoulders, finally covering her head. The Selkie let out a soft moan. Helpless, he watched as she moved to the water’s edge ... then disappeared.

Paul Stansbury is a lifelong native of Kentucky. Now retired, he lives in Danville, Kentucky. His stories have appeared in the anthologies, Brief Grislys, published by Apocryphile Press, Neo-Legends To Last A Deathtime published by KY Story, Frightening published by SEZ Publishing, Out of the Cave published by MacKenzie Publishing, In Media Res, Stories From the In-Between published by Writespace Houston and Nocturnal Natures published by Zimbell House Publishing. His work has also appeared in a variety of on-line publications. His Novelette Little Green Men has been published as an e-publication by Bard and Sages Publishing. His poetry has appeared in The Rising Phoenix Review, Young Ravens Literary Review and Kentucky Monthly. He is a contributing writer for the Danville Advocate Messenger Newspaper.

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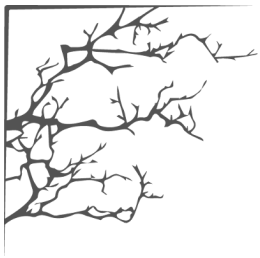

Roland
J. Lee Strickland

ROLAND WATCHED AS THE six valley men lowered the rude box into the earth. Teller, his neighbor, was one of them. He had asked Roland to take one of the ropes, but Roland refused. His mother lay in that box. How could he? The others were older, practiced. They had done this many times —their mothers, fathers, their wives, their brothers, even their own children, some of them. Their hands were steady on the ropes—pay out a length, hand up, pay out another length, hand up—all together, like a crafty machine.

What was the point? What was the point of scraping at the soil, planting seeds, tending the sheep and goats, or milking the cows? What was the point of anything if this was the final result? To be a corpse. In a box. In the ground.

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"I have a talent for walking," Roland thought as he gazed on the dusty path leading uphill away from him. His shadow sprinted ahead as if to show him that, even in walking, there were those with more talent than he. The sun just at his back reminded Roland that he'd been walking nearly half the day already. He looked down the way he'd come and could still discern below him the bowl-like shape of Midvale. Midvale, where most folk thought he had little talent for anything. All detail was lost, the ribbon of path vanishing among tall grasses in the near distance, but Midvale didn't matter. It was behind him. The mountain lay ahead.

He had left the valley to climb this mountain only one other time, and that had been as an infant some 18 years before. He remembered nothing of that journey, though his mother's stories over the years had created in him an expectation of familiarity. This was reinforced by his conversation with Teller the day before.

"It's a hard climb," his neighbor had said, "But you'll find plenty of nice places to rest. And when you reach the Great Wood, there you'll stop

for the night."

Ahead a stand of trees spread its shade across the trail, and the widening of the path seemed to indicate that here was a popular resting place for wayfarers. Roland set his sack on the ground and sat with his back to a tree. He drank from the wineskin that still hung from his neck. He took a piece of hard bread and a cheese rind from the sack, contemplated them for a moment, and put them back. He had not eaten a real meal in more than three weeks, not since his mother had become ill. She had prepared nearly every meal he had eaten. But no more. He squeezed his eyes shut against the thought and took another drink from the wineskin. A half-day's vigorous climb out of the valley had done nothing to awaken his appetite, the hard lump of his stomach an angry fist that refused to open.

After they laid his mother in the ground, Teller had taken him aside. "Everyone says you are your mother's son, Roland, but sometimes I see your father in you. You have to be strong in this. There's still work to be done. There's still life to be lived."

Roland never knew his father, and when he asked people would answer only, "Your father was a good man, Roland. Let him rest in peace." His mother replied to his questions with mute sadness, and he'd soon learned not to ask. But today he understood things that in the past had been shrouded in mystery. He understood that his father had not died while adventuring in some exotic land, as he had fantasized in his childhood, nor had he died defending the realm. No fever had struck him down. Roland saw with clarity now. His father's death was no accident. If such a thing could be chosen, his father had chosen his death.

He understood that the journey of 18 years before was his mother's flight from that death, running away from something she could not face. The only other time he had seen his mother's sister, Silvina, and her daughter Ramina, they were on their own journey of death. That was why his family traveled the mountain—to acknowledge death, to escape it, or to seek it.

Roland saw himself with new eyes. The darkness that had lurked unnoticed in him, which had grown and strengthened from the moment of his mother's death—it was his father inside him, just as the carefree child was his mother. That's what Teller had sensed.

It was Teller who suggested that he should seek council with his Aunt Silvina. "I'll tend the farm for a few days," he'd said. "You needn't trouble yourself about that."

Roland had listened, this dark piece within him, as Teller described the path to Farfell. His description of the gorge at the top of the world, a place that filled Teller with fear even in speaking of it, was fascinating to Roland. He imagined himself on that precipice, pressed against the veil between the world and nothingness, and the veil seemed easily torn. So he told Teller he would go to Farfell, to his aunt. But only the child in him believed that.

Roland pushed himself to his feet and shouldered his sack. He looked north, in the direction of Farfell. Part of him rejoiced in the beautiful day, and he gave himself over to that. Up the slope in the far distance he could see a thin line of darker green that marked where a spur of the Great Wood crossed the path he walked. That would be his goal for the evening, to reach that and, with the most difficult part of the journey complete, to rest.

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By the time Roland reached the Great Wood, he felt he had exhausted his talent for walking. The steady slope of the trail had become arduous, and the muscles in his legs quivered with each step. The sun hung low at his left hand, and his shadow, taller and more companionable now, kept pace with him on his right. The phrase, "twice as far as Farfell," came to his mind, a phrase used by the dwellers of Midvale to describe any impossible thing. He looked back at the relentless slope of the mountain. The valley far below was lost in the violet haze of a twilight that had yet to reach his elevation. He thought of another phrase, one popular with the people of Farfell: "as easy as rolling to Midvale." If he fell now, he thought, he would easily roll all the way back to the doorstep of the farmhouse.

Before him, the Great Wood had become a towering wall of green that stretched both east and west as far as Roland could see. To the east it seemed to curve around, reaching down to the south before losing its definiteness. The sight was breath-taking. He imagined his mother standing in the same spot, an exhausted child in her arms.

The trees at the margin danced a stately dance, swaying to a slow rhythm inaudible to his ears. They dipped their branches and raised them beckoning Roland forward. Their calm majesty served to lift some of the

fatigue from his body. The path seemed too humble a thing to penetrate such grandeur, yet as Roland strode past the first vaulting trunks he felt like a dove slicing through air.

As he entered the woods he remembered the stories set there that his mother had told him, stories of animals that spoke and women who bore the names of flowers and shared in the elemental powers of the earth. He wondered if any such folk still lived in the wild recesses of the forest. He thought, too, of Teller, who would be tending the farm's animals now. He would be closing the sheep in the paddock and gathering eggs as the chickens took to their roosts. He would pitch hay to the horses and bring in the goats for milking. The muscles and bones of Roland's body spoke to him of these tasks that he had performed every day from the time he was ten. His body felt like a foreign object estranged from years of routine. He felt a pain in his heart at the thought that he would never do any of it again.

He lay on the ground sipping from his wineskin as around him the forest murmured its own way toward night. The susurrations were unintelligible but soothing, and as the tenseness drained from his tired muscles, Roland fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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He awoke as the first wispy tendrils of sunlight were glancing off the dew-dusted foliage at the top of the forest canopy. Around him the Wood was alive with sound. His sack, carelessly left on the ground, also seemed alive. Roland watched as a tail, and then the body and head, of a squirrel emerged, a chunk of bread grasped between its front paws. Another joined the first and found the cheese. Roland's first impulse was to chase them away, but he had no desire for the food, and the innocent enthusiasm of the animals charmed him. A larger animal pushed its way noisily through the underbrush nearby, and all three of them paused until the din receded. Then Roland forced his reluctant body upright. It would be a half-day's walk just to the highest point of the mountain pass leading to Farfell, but with his sack so much the lighter thanks to his squirrel friends, Roland thought, it would be an easy stroll.

The part of the Great Wood through which he had to pass occupied a broad bench that interrupted the steep slope of the mountain, and the gentle grade and abundant vegetation were a soothing contrast to the previous day's relentless climb. The novelty of his surroundings occupied

the whole of Roland's mind, and he moved along with a kind of automatic vigor, giving no thought to the next steps of his journey.

Where the southern edge of the forest had been striking and abrupt, the northern margin's transition was as gradual as to be almost imperceptible. The trees became smaller by degrees, and their tops flagged to the east in response to a constant westerly breeze. The undergrowth thinned, and the path turned gradually to the west, urged by the steeper barren slope to the north. The landscape grew bleak. The air grew cooler, sharper, with a hint of mineral hardness, and the wind, no longer just a murmur high in the canopy, came to the ground and spoke forcefully of its own designs.

The wind would be Roland's companion for the rest of the climb, and it was a companion that did little to invite polite dialogue. Its banter was incessant and increasingly strident. Roland strained with the effort to walk, and the child in him cowered in silence. At the crest of the pass the wind snatched at his breath, demanding a word from him in the midst of its own roar as if demanding to know what dark plan was hidden in his heart. It tore at his clothing and whipped his hair, but Roland pushed forward with grim determination. From here the path sloped downward, and a score of steps later the wind had calmed to an amiable murmur. Roland was able to pause.

Ahead, the trail followed a broad, westward-tending declivity with a low, protective prominence to the south and the sheer face of the mountain rising on the north side. In an otherwise clear sky, the heights of the mountain were ringed in clouds. Toward the west, below the clouds, a spray of mist wafted from the side of the mountain and at its edge, a shard of rainbow hung suspended in the air. A new sound assailed his ears, the sound of rushing water, crowding out the intermittent roar of the wind that still called out from above.

Roland moved down the path a short way to where a magnificent waterfall revealed itself. The shard of rainbow now arched like a flying buttress across the path, which seemed swallowed by the mist that billowed from the foot of the falls. As Roland came abreast of the torrent, he saw that it had long since carved its own path well below his.

The gorge was there. He had seen it in his mind as Teller described its terrible majesty. Perhaps he remembered it, too, from that long-ago, infant journey. Centuries of rock, pounded away by the ceaseless falling water, tumbled into the gorge's throat to be battered to the finest powder and

carried miles down the river to spread on the valley floor. Now the canyon wall was as shear as if it had been cut by some giant's hand, the distant bottom invisible in the roiling mist, except when the chaotic swirl opened for an eye blink to provide a tantalizing glimpse of the jagged, forbidding floor. And it would be easy, as that dark piece of him had promised, to be freed of all the loneliness, the sorrow, the heartache, the pain, the pointlessness, with just a single, ordinary step, no different from the thousands upon thousands that had carried him here.

Just then, over the soothing murmur of his own inner voice, another. "*Roland. Step back. The path is to your left*." The voice repeated, "*Step back*."

The child awoke. The part that had retreated in silence through the morning's march over the pass pushed into his awareness. His child's eyes stared into the gorge, and horror invaded the tranquility of his mind. His body was paralyzed by two warring impulses. Then the child, ever-obedient, took a step back, and another. His body turned left. He stumbled into the mist. The turbulent fog robbed him of all vision, and the precipice that before had beckoned him became a source of fear. One misstep and he might go by accident to where intention had failed to carry him. Blinded by the luminous cloud that surrounded him, he froze. His child-mind responded with terror to every thought of movement until the voice returned to his head.

"*Move left, Roland, to the rainbow's end. Feel the stone that protects you*."

In his mind Roland pictured the spot where the rainbow had met the stone that edged the south side of the path. He moved toward it, hand outstretched, and the cold, slippery hardness of the wall greeted his fingers.

"*Come forward to the other side. Nothing to fear.”*

In the grip of that other voice, he made his way through the mist that shrouded the path. Icy droplets settled on his clothing, in his hair, and made a dancing display in the brilliant sunlight, a living curtain of shifting color as if he had entered the breast of the rainbow itself. All detail of the surroundings was lost in the dizzying display. It ended quickly, as Roland emerged on the other side, eyes blinking, head slicked wet like a newborn. Below him now he could see the village of Farfell—a roof, the glint of a

window in the sunlight, a severe architecture barely distinguishable from the stone of the mountain itself.

What happened? The path seemed so clear, that last step so easy, and yet he turned away. He looked away from Farfell, back the way he'd come, but the mist became a wall. The gorge no longer beckoned. That path was shut. Again he moved as far from the edge as he could until his back felt the damp, shear stone of the mountain. His legs shook with the memory of the childish fright he'd felt. And the voice. He'd heard a voice. But there was no one near. He hunched his shoulders and turned down the path, his focus on the village ahead.

The few houses of Farfell were crowded onto a narrow flat beneath the towering brow of the higher peaks. Their tall, steep-pitched roofs echoed the surrounding mountains. The simplicity of their adornment matched the severity of the landscape so different from the sprawling lowlands. The gorge to his right seemed to cut the village in two, and a bridge arched across it, uniting the halves. Crossing the bridge, Roland glanced a last time into the depths, but for the moment, the dark side of him was tamed.

He must somehow find Silvina's house. This had not been part of the plan. As he passed, he looked from one closed door to the next, but they told him nothing. The village seemed deserted, the solitude pressing in upon Roland. Beyond the bridge, the street widened into a plaza, at the center of which was the town fountain. As Roland approached, a young woman carrying a bucket came out of one of the houses on the plaza's far side. With uncharacteristic boldness Roland intercepted her path to the fountain.

"Forgive me, Miss, for disturbing you. Perhaps you can help me. I've come a long way. I seek the house of Silvina Loubelle."

The woman stared at him steadily. She was beautiful, Roland thought, and shyness and embarrassment flooded back. He looked away and studied instead the cobbles of the street.

"And who might you be?"

Roland spoke just above a whisper. "I am Roland of Midvale, son of Terrestina Loubelle." To his surprise the woman dropped her bucket and threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh, my! Roland! It's me, Ramina!" She pushed away to stare at him, then hugged him again. Roland's arms encircled her to return the embrace.

He looked at her. It was Ramina. The child's face he remembered from years before was still there, but changed in maturity, and so beautiful.

"What brings you such a long way to Farfell?"

Roland could not speak, and as Ramina looked at him, the brilliant smile left her face.

"Auntie Terrestina?"

The name brought him back to the valley, to the graveside, to the ropes he wouldn't touch, to the death he couldn't accept. He closed his eyes against the vision, but his tears pushed through.

Ramina clutched his hand. "Come. Let's go to the house," she said, pulling him along.

"Wait," Roland said, resisting. He picked up the forgotten bucket. "You'll still need water."

Inside the house, Silvina was waiting for them. Her oak-red hair, wild and unbound, spread out from her head like the crown of a tree, and her intense blue eyes shone like lights from her face. Her sinewy, blue-veined arms did not seem made for comforting, but when she pulled Roland to her breast he felt a dam break deep inside him, and warm, cleansing sorrow poured out. She held him, fiercely at first, then gently, until the waves of grief subsided, and fatigue took their place.

"I knew," she said. "I knew days ago. Sometimes we know things, and still we don't want to believe them. Thank you for this journey. Thank you for being here."

She stroked his head and shoulders, holding him tight against her. She murmured, and her murmuring was like rustling leaves or water spilling over rocks. Somehow she lifted the burden of his mother's death from his shoulders. *Life*, Silvina's words whispered. *Death is just another kind of life*.

She held him at arm's length and looked into his eyes. "I saw you on the path above the falls. You need to watch where you're going." Her tone was casual, but tears glistened in her eyes. "Come. Sit. Rest. The journey from Midvale is a long one. You must be hungry."

Roland was not, but he allowed himself to be led to a seat at the table in the center of the kitchen. Ramina was there, busy with preparations for a meal.

The food Ramina put before him did what two days' walking and a night in the Great Wood could not. It awakened an old appetite, and with

the first bite Roland felt himself return to the living. The food was delightful, unlike anything he had ever tasted before, and, tears coming again, he cried out, "Oh how I've missed Mother's cooking."

Silvina nodded sympathetically. "She was a wonderful cook, your mother was. Few could match her. Ramina has the knack for it."

"I just fix things as I like them," Ramina laughed. "That's my trick. If you make something you're happy to eat, then others will eat it as well."

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In the morning as he made ready to leave, Silvina came to him.

"What do you plan to do?'

"I don't know. I hadn't thought." The child in him stared longingly into the past. The dark part was silent.

"You are your mother's child, Roland. She loved the farm. That is where she still lives. Go back and see what it means to you. In two months' time, before the first snows, Ramina and I will come to Midvale." *Wait for us until then.* She smiled, but her gaze pierced him.

He realized that she had not spoken those words, yet he had heard them, and he heard that they were directed to the darkness within him. "I will wait for you," he said.

Ramina stood by, and now she embraced him.

"I have a present for you." She handed him a large earthenware jar. "Smell it," she said, removing the lid and urging the crock toward his nose.

"It smells really good. What is it?"

"It's called budeh. It comes from beyond the Great Sea, from a friend." Her eyes strayed away from his and toward the floor. "He's more than a friend, really," she whispered.

Roland smelled it again. "Budeh—but what—"

"It's a kind of spice, a mixture of spices, and other things, I guess."

"But what do I do with it?"

"Put it on food, Roland," Ramina said, exasperated.

Roland was too embarrassed to ask more.

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The return trip from Farfell to Midvale was as easy as the adage had promised. Roland arrived at the farm just as dusk was settling over the valley. Behind him a sliver of sunlight still illuminated the towering crest of the mountain, and he stopped to watch as its color deepened to red before sliding to gray, like the closing of a curtain. Bayla, the dog, came

from her lean-to next to the paddock to give Roland an enthusiastic greeting. He could see the dark shapes of the sheep lying together, and he heard the sighs of the chickens settling on their roosts in the nearby chicken house. The barn door was closed but he could hear the somnolent shuffling of livestock inside.

The house was dark and silent. Roland felt again the melancholy weight of its stillness. He remembered his promise to Silvina and wished that Teller was still about, working the evening chores—someone to distract him—but the man had finished and was gone. Across the way, Roland could see light in the windows of Teller's house. He lit several lamps to dispel the shadows.

He was hungry. He sat at the table, a seat that had been his for countless meals. He thought back to the wonderful meal of the night before. His hunger increasing, he went to the pantry. Teller had left a basket of eggs on the bottom shelf, but what to do with them? Roland didn't know. He found some potatoes and, on a shelf near the door, some books his mother had used for recipes.

He took a book at random and leafed through it until he found: "*A simple potato dish can be made by placing clean, chunked potatoes in salted water and boiling them until tender*." It sounded simple. He started a fire in the stove and searched the kitchen for a pot, salt, measuring utensils. He saw that the kitchen was elegantly organized, each necessary object ready at hand, and he smiled as he remembered his mother moving through this same space. He berated himself for never having paid attention to the details of the magic that she had performed there nearly every day of his life.

The wait for the water to boil seemed interminable. Time and again he tested the potatoes with his fork, but they were like rocks beneath his thrust. Finally one and then another yielded to the fork as the recipe had promised. Roland remembered the crock of spice, the budeh, which Ramina had given him. *Put it on food,* she had said. It was still in his bag, which he had dropped next to the door. He drained the potatoes and added some butter as the recipe suggested, then he sprinkled a bit of the budeh on top. He spooned some onto his plate and sat at the table.

They were delicious. He ate some more. They were unlike anything he could remember of his mother's cooking. And they were very good.

Outside the dog barked short friendly yips, and there was a knock at the door. It was Teller, his burly frame filling the doorway when Roland opened it.

"I saw the light. I thought it would be you. I just wanted to check."

Roland stepped back from the door. "Come in, Teller. Here, I'll get you some wine." He pulled out a chair for his neighbor, and, as Teller settled into it, he poured two mugs of wine.

"So, you saw Silvina and the girl?"

"Ramina, yes. They're fine, doing well. Thanks so much for tending the animals. Anything I can do for you, just ask."

"It was nothing." Teller waved his free hand, sipping his wine. "Your family has always been good to me. Your mother..." he hesitated.

"It's alright," Roland said. "Aunt Silvina helped me to understand. I'll get used to it in time." He stared at the dark surface of his wine and doubted it was true.

The silence held between them until Roland asked, "Would you like something to eat?"

"You cooked?" Teller seemed surprised by the thought. "I didn't know you could cook."

"I can't," Roland replied. "But I looked in Mother's recipe book." He didn't mention the budeh and resolved at that moment that he would keep it out of sight. "It's just potatoes. Nothing fancy."

"I don't want to take food out of your mouth," Teller protested.

"I made a lot. I'm not a good judge of my own appetite." Roland set a plate of potatoes in front of Teller.

The first bite only seemed to deepen Teller's surprise. He took a second bite and a third. With each one his face seemed to brighten. His eyes closed to slits as he savored each mouthful.

"Goodness, Roland. These are..." he hesitated looking down at his plate. "Well, they're...they're wonderful."

Roland nodded, enjoying his own. "They're good potatoes. It must be a good year for potatoes." He watched as Teller cleaned his plate. "Would you like some more?"

"Maybe just a tiny bit. For the flavor. I can't say I've ever had anything quite like it."

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Early the next day Roland started in earnest on the farmstead tasks. During the weeks of his mother's illness and the days following her death much had been neglected, and by midday Roland was feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that confronted him. In times past he and his mother had gone along in a steady rhythm dictated by weather, the turning of the seasons, and the cycles of planting and harvest. Suddenly all was out of joint. And Roland was hungry.

He left unfinished the fence he had been mending and returned to the house. A row of lush greenery in the kitchen garden caught his eye, and he pulled several turnips from the ground. "I'll do something with these," he thought. He searched through one of the books and found a recipe that suggested pairing sliced turnips and apples. He carefully followed the recipe's steps. At the end, he brought the crock of budeh from its place in the pantry and sprinkled a little on top.

He had left the front door open, and afternoon sun spilled across the floor. As he sat down to eat, a shadow interrupted the sunlight. It was Teller.

"I thought I'd stop by and see how you're making out," he said, then stopped, his nose working. "Are you cooking again?"

"I have to eat," Roland replied. "Why don't you join me?" He pulled a plate from the sideboard.

"Oh, I couldn't," Teller said, but he was already moving farther into the room.

Roland filled the plates and motioned Teller into a chair. "To tell you the truth, I'm struggling today. There's just so much work to do. . ."

"You're not struggling with food," Teller said between mouthfuls. "This is fantastic."

Roland helped himself to a bite and was surprised that, again, the food was amazingly good.

Teller continued, "I'd be glad to come over and help out with chores, and maybe I could help eat your cooking once in a while." He laughed. "Seriously, Roland. I know it's hard for you, losing your mother. She was a special person and a hard worker. I'm in my easy time now. It won't be a burden."

Teller was interrupted by knocking on the frame of the open door. Roland looked up to see the miller and his son.

"Roland, we brought some flour and some cornmeal, fresh-milled this morning." They set down two large sacks. "Sorry for your troubles."

Roland rose from his seat. "Thank you, Joris. You're too generous. Do you have time to visit? Teller and I were just having a bit of lunch."

"You cooked?"

"Roland's a great cook," Teller retorted. "In a class with his mother near as I can tell. You have to taste this. It's amazing."

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In the close community of Midvale there was a solid tradition of neighborliness that expressed itself strongly in times of trouble. Those who suffered misfortune were awarded the compassion and material support of their fellow folk, whether the merchants and artisans of the village, or the farmers who formed the village's rural buttress. Indeed every household in the valley would provide its unique expression of support, so Roland saw nothing peculiar in the growing stream of visitors that appeared at the farm on subsequent days. They brought clothing, tools and all manner of useful objects, and they brought food. Most appreciated by Roland, they brought offers of help on the farm and around the house. Roland left it to Teller to direct the labors while for his part he indulged his new-found talent for cooking. The kitchen soon came to occupy the bulk of his time.

It struck Roland that each day the stream of visitors included people he had never seen before. Relatives of his neighbors coming from nearby villages, friends of friends, and even travelers staying at the village inn would stop by the farm to lend a hand. He was working in the kitchen preparing the midday meal when a young woman came in.

"My father's working on the roof. He doesn't want me on the roof. I can do roof work. I can do just about anything, but Father's afraid I'll get hurt." She was small, and she moved like a dancer. Her brown hair was chopped short in a boyish cut, and she wore leather trousers of a kind popular among artisans of the valley. "We've come from Second Fork just this morning. I don't get to travel much, but Father does, for his work, fixing things. He can fix anything that's broken, sometimes even better than new. I help him when he lets me. I could help you in here if you like."

Her chatter was musical, her voice pleasant. Roland found himself enjoying the flowing lilt of her monologue. She's like a hummingbird, he thought, or a bee, flitting about so quickly. Indeed she moved with graceful

rapidity around the kitchen as she talked, hovering briefly here or there only to shoot off again in a new direction.

"What's this?" she asked. "It smells really good."

Roland looked up. She was holding the crock of budeh.

"Put that down," he shouted.

She stepped back, the crock still in her hands, quizzical surprise on her face. Then the crock was on the counter, she with arms at her sides as if she hadn't moved. "What?" she managed to say.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to shout. It's just, it's just...." Roland fumbled for an explanation. "It's a... a special crock, my mother's favorite. I don't want it to get broken." He took the crock from the counter and carried it into the pantry. When he returned she was gone.

Roland was shaken. Budeh was his secret, and he saw how easily that secret could be lost. What if she had dropped it? Or worse, what if she had divined its role in Roland's world? He realized with sudden clarity that all the visitors, all the unsolicited help, all the attention that had started as a testament to his mother, had become a response to his cooking, a curiosity that fed his expanding reputation, and the budeh, the crock of mysterious spice, was the key to it all.

As he served the meal that day, Roland searched the tables for the young woman, but she had disappeared. The meal finished, he ignored the cleanup and instead walked outside. After the mid-day meal most of the workers would take a short nap before returning to work. It was quiet. The sun shone and a light breeze was blowing. He heard her voice before he saw her.

She was sitting in a pile of straw with Bayla, her arm thrown carelessly around the dog's shoulders. She was having an earnest, if somewhat one-sided, conversation with the dog, whose contribution consisted of leaning against her and giving her face an occasional lick. Roland couldn't make out the words, but the music of her voice was plain. He stopped to listen hoping she would not notice. Bayla must have caught his scent. Her tail swished in the straw and the girl looked up. When she saw Roland she stopped talking.

"Sorry to bother you," Roland said. "I was just... you didn't have anything to eat. I thought...."

"I wasn't hungry," she said, still speaking to the dog

"But, I...."

"Yes, I know. Everyone thinks your food is wonderful. That's why they come isn't it? Well, I came with my father, and I'll be leaving with him soon."

"But, I don't even know your name," Roland said, feeling some hint of desperation growing within him.

"Iduna. My name's Iduna. I'm named for my grandmother who was named for her grandmother, and on back as far as anyone knows."

Each time she stopped, the air was emptied of music, and Roland yearned for her to speak again. "I'm sorry you weren't hungry. I was looking for you. I want you to... I want to accept your offer... to help in the kitchen."

"Oh, I can't," she said, dismissive, not looking at him. Bayla licked her face again. "We're leaving later today."

"Leaving? Can't you stay another day?"

"Father has work up the valley. It can't be put off." She hugged Bayla and stood. "I'd better go see if he needs help on that roof." She walked off, and Bayla followed her.

Roland spent a long time contemplating the impression she had left in the straw. Then he went looking for Teller.

"Teller, do you know the man who's been working on the roof today?"

"Emmit? I know him very well. He comes through Midvale regular. He can fix anything."

"I'd like you to ask him if he'll stay on for a while."

Teller contemplated the request for a moment. "You know, Roland, most folks come by because they're curious. They're happy to work a bit for a chance to taste your cooking, but staying on? That's more commitment than most would make. And he's got his daughter with him. You'll have to feed her too."

"Well, I could pay a little, offer some barter. It's just, he can do things no one else will do around here, Teller. He's worth ten good-hearted folk when it comes to getting things done, and I'm desperate to get the farm in order before winter. I can't do it myself. Especially if I'm spending all my time in the kitchen."

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That night Roland found it difficult to sleep, and when sleep did come his dreams were chaotic and exhausting. He awoke with the darkness rising within him, overwhelming, insistent, as it had been that day on the

mountain. He busied himself for a time in the kitchen, but it was no use. He wandered outside in the half-light of dawn. He was just past the sheep paddock when he heard it—the unmistakable sound of Iduna's voice, quiet and steady, like a melody from across a meadow. It seemed to be coming from the barn loft. Roland's heart leapt. He stood transfixed, listening, and when her voice stopped for a moment, he wanted to cry out.

He went to the kitchen, heated some goat's milk, and added some honey and a dash of the spice. He put the milk in a large mug and went outside. When he returned to the barn, Iduna was sitting on a bench next to the door, a lamb curled in her lap. She talked to it quietly as she stroked its back.

"Good morning, Iduna," Roland said holding out the mug to her. "I made you a little something."

She eyed the mug with suspicion, but her obstinacy of the day before had left her feeling hungry. She accepted it and wrapped both hands around its warmth.

"I'm glad you decided to stay."

"Father wants to stay a few days." She looked away as she spoke. "I guess he feels sorry for you. He says you're not capable of fixing all the broken things there are around here. He says he'd feel bad if he left you here with everything falling down around your ears."

"The way things are, I could certainly use the help, and it's very appreciated."

Iduna brought the mug to her lips and drank. "Oh," was all she said, and took another sip. "Oh, this is good." Her eyes sparkled, and she looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "What is it?"

"Just goat's milk and honey. Do you like it?"

"Yours must be special goats. I could help you milk the goats. I'm very good at it. I've milked lots of goats and cows, and I can show you how to make a special cheese." She stopped long enough to take another sip of milk. "I've never tasted anything quite like it," she said.

"Would you help me in the kitchen?" Roland asked.

"Of course." She laughed. "Where else would we make the special cheese?"

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Iduna was a constant source of amazement in the kitchen. It seemed that she completed tasks almost as quickly as Roland could express them.

Sometimes he didn't remember speaking at all, as if she had read his thoughts. And her lilting chatter was incessant, but not in the least irritating for that. It was music to Roland, and it seemed there was no need to follow the meaning of the words.

He made it clear to her that he would need a few minutes alone in the kitchen before each meal was served, giving her the task of gathering the people to the tables. He carefully guarded the crock of budeh, and she never raised the subject of that first day.

One day as he and Iduna were making final preparations for the mid-day meal, Teller appeared in the kitchen. "The Mayor's here, Roland. He'd like to have a word with you."

"With me? What about?"

"He didn't say, but I'd imagine it's about your cooking. When folks talk about you, or to you these days, it's usually about your cooking." Teller laughed and tilted his nose in the air. "It smells right good in here, by the way."

"I can't leave the kitchen." Roland was flustered. "Can you ask him to come in?"

"I can, but don't be too long with him. There's a crowd of hungry folk gathering outside, and I don't want a riot on my hands." Teller turned and left.

Iduna pulled a tray of rolls from the oven and replaced them with another. Their toasty fragrance filled the room. "What do you think he wants?" she asked, then without waiting for an answer, "Maybe he wants you to invite him to lunch. I don't think he's been here for lunch. Or he sees how influential you've become. He probably wants you on the village council, or perhaps as his personal advisor...."

"Iduna." Roland spoke sharply and nodded toward the door.

The Mayor stood there, his broad-brimmed, felted hat in his hands, the ceremonial sash across his chest marking this as official mayoral business. "Roland, so good to see you." He nodded.

"Lord Mayor," Roland bowed. "I'm honored."

"Please. Ferris is fine. No need for formality." Most days the Mayor tended a small shop in the village where he sharpened knives, scissors, chisels, spades and any other implements needing an edge that folk might bring him. Nonetheless, it was well-known among the citizens of Midvale

that he enjoyed the honorifics of his position when official business called for it.

"My condolences to you," he continued. "Your mother's industry was a credit to Midvale, and her loss was a loss to us all."

"Thank you, sir." Roland bowed again, partly to hide the distress he still felt at each reminder of his mother's passing.

Iduna was moving nervously from one foot to the other, so Roland said, "Let me introduce you to my assistant. Iduna, this is the Lord Mayor of Midvale."

The Mayor bowed gravely in her direction.

Iduna made a strange gesture, half bow, half curtsy, plucking the hem of an imaginary skirt away from her leather-clad knees. "Pleased to meet you, Lord. Meaning no disrespect, I need to take the rolls out of the oven. It wouldn't do to burn the rolls and have no rolls for lunch with all the hungry hands outside who've been working hard all morning, and are more than deserving of...."

Roland interrupted with a wave of his hand. He hated to do it, he so loved the sound of her voice. Iduna, looking only a little annoyed, turned to the oven.

"A dedicated and attentive assistant it seems," the Mayor said smiling. His face lit up as the smell of fresh rolls again filled the room. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. "Ah, that brings me to the subject of my visit."

"You're welcome to join us for lunch," Roland offered before the Mayor could elaborate.

"Would that I could, lad, but I already have a lot on my plate, none of it as savory as what I might enjoy here." The Mayor chuckled at his own joke. "But I've come to ask a favor. Roland, the news of your talent for cooking has spread throughout the valley, up and down the river, even into the hill towns. I wouldn't be surprised if you were talked about all the way to Farfell."

At the mention of Farfell, Roland thought of Ramina and blurted out, "I just make what I like. If you make something you're happy to eat, others will like it as well."

The Mayor laughed. "You always were a humble boy. But what you do is much more than that."

Iduna began another little dance, and Roland realized that she was about to speak again. Impulsively he grabbed her wrist. Her hand slid into

his, and their fingers twined. Roland blushed, and the Mayor took it as a humble reaction to his praise.

"Seriously, Roland. I hear what people are saying about you. But let me tell you my problem, something I think you are uniquely suited to helping me with. The Prime Minister is touring the countryside. She will be in Midvale in three days' time. I'd like you to prepare a meal in her honor."

Roland could barely focus on anything except the feel of Iduna's hand in his. He wasn't sure he understood what the Mayor was asking. "I don't...." Iduna's grip tightened. He was amazed at her strength.

"He would be honored to do it," she said, "And I'd be glad to help. Nobody can cook like Roland. Just ask my father. He travels all up and down the valley, and he can fix anything, even better than new most times, that's what he does, and he says he's never tasted anything as good as what Roland makes right here in this kitchen." She squeezed Roland's hand harder. Hints of pain blended with the intense pleasure of her touch, and Roland felt more confused.

"Then it's settled." The Mayor clapped his hands. "These state visits are a nightmare of details. I'm so thankful for your help. Get me a list of what you need by tomorrow, and I'll see that it's done." He spun on his heel as if to leave, then stopped and turned back to them. "A pleasure to meet you, Iduna," he said and bowed.

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The market pavilion at the center of town had been converted to an enormous dining hall. Long tables and benches stretched from one end to the other, and gaily colored tapestries hung between the posts. Lanterns were strung along the beams, and merry shadows danced in the vaulted space below the roof. A carnival atmosphere permeated the village, with vendors setting up make-shift booths, and performers practicing among the bustle of the growing crowd.

The proprietor of the inn, just beside the pavilion, had offered his kitchen for Roland's use, as well as the service of the kitchen help and wait staff. Roland was bewildered by details of organizing, but Iduna attacked them with enthusiasm. They had spent the previous night setting up, Iduna chattering incessantly to all, reviewing the menu, assigning tasks, her voice providing an undercurrent of music that was both comforting and exciting. She had quickly become friends with Maddy, the head of the kitchen crew, and they were working together like they had been doing it

all their lives. Now as Roland surveyed the dining area, his excitement mixed with dread. How had he gone from his solitary life on the farm to this?

People were filtering in. The tables were adorned with vases of fresh-cut flowers and mounded with breads and rolls, plates of cheeses, pitchers of wine and beer. Teller had donated a full wheel of his finest aged cheese, which sat on its own table just in front of the table reserved for the dignitaries. The Mayor would cut the first piece to present to the Prime Minister before the rest was served to the other diners.

"Roland!" The sound of his name broke through Roland's reverie. It was the Mayor beckoning to him from the head table where he stood with the prime minister. Roland went to them, and the Mayor made the introductions. The Prime Minister extended her hand.

"So, you are Roland." Her grip, when she took his hand, was strong and firm, reminding Roland of the thrill and power of Iduna's touch. She was silent a long time, her gaze direct and unwavering, as if she were studying him. "The Mayor thinks a lot of you." She smiled. "If you're as good as he says, I may have to take you home with me."

Could she do that? Make him leave Midvale? He didn't know. What if the food was not good? What then? New anxiety gnawed at his stomach.

"I only hope you find our humble fare as pleasing as do my friends and neighbors," he managed to say, a tremor entering his voice.

"I would be pleased if you can join us at table once the food is served," the Prime Minister replied.

Without thinking Roland asked, "Can Iduna join us, too?"

"Iduna? And who is this Iduna?"

"Iduna is Roland's assistant." The Mayor winked as he spoke. Roland blushed.

"I'm certain we can find room for her," the Prime Minister said. She still held Roland's hand, and now she patted it with her free one before letting him go.

Back in the kitchen, Roland found Iduna. She was flitting about even more quickly than usual, her excitement infecting everyone in the room.

"Iduna, the Prime Minister wants us to sit with her at her table."

"Oh, my," Iduna stopped what she was doing. "Can we do that? I mean, are we allowed?" She looked down at her clothes, the leather breeches and linen jerkin she always wore. "Do you think...? My father will not believe

it. Are you sure she asked for me? I'm just a helper. You're the one, Roland. You're the one they want."

"No, she asked for you. We'll sit together. Don't worry." He looked around the kitchen at the other help, at the mounds of food in pots and bowls. "How close are we?"

"I think we're ready," Iduna replied. "I'll take everyone out and wait for you to call us." She quickly ushered the others from the room.

Alone in the kitchen, Roland surveyed the bowls of food steaming on the central table. He retrieved his bag from its hiding place in the broom closet and carefully placed the budeh crock on the counter. He opened it.

It was empty. The ineffable odor of mystery that had greeted him every day was gone. How could it be? There was not even a trace of dust clinging to sides of the crock.

But Roland knew how it could be. He knew, in retrospect, how it was, how that part of him that cared for the everyday things of life had been rationing the dwindling supply of spice until, near the end, imperceptible dustings had sufficed to transform his cooking into a feast. He had been aware of the inevitability of this moment, but his conscious mind had denied it, pushed it into the darkest corner, because to face it was to face the unthinkable. But the moment was here. He thought with regret of the earliest days when he had been wildly generous with his applications of the spice. Too late to call it back, nor did it matter. The spice was a distraction, a glamour that had for a time disguised the bleakness of the world. He saw, too, that during that time of distraction, the darkness inside him had ripened and threatened to burst.

He listened to the noises from the dining hall, animated conversation, boisterous laughter, the clank of cups and cutlery. He heard the beginnings of a chant, "Roland, Roland!" It rose, louder and louder, until it dissolved into a cascade of indecipherable sound. He thought of the crash of water in the gorge at the top of the world, the precipice on the path to Farfell. If the earth opened before him now, he would take that step. No voice would call him back. But the earth would not do him that favor. He looked about him and picked a knife from off the counter. He drew the blade across his thumb testing its sharpness. He watched a ruby blob of blood rise from the wound, break, and scamper in a stream toward his wrist. The door opened behind him, but he did not turn around.

"Roland," Iduna said. "What's taking so long? The cheese has been served. We've put out extra bread. I'm afraid some people might be getting drunk. It's time to eat. Can we bring out the food now?"

Iduna's voice came to him as if from a great distance. Not like the voice at the gorge, less real, like a murmur in a dream. He turned toward the sound.

"But, the food. Is the food....?" His look was enough to stop her. She put her hand to her mouth and gasped. "Roland, you're bleeding." She ran to him and grabbed his arm

At the touch of Iduna's hand, Roland felt a new wave of terror. What once had been an intense pleasure, now was a burn, but he did not recoil. Instead he took her hand in his. He clung to her, though he knew he had already lost her.

"Roland, what's wrong? What happened?"

He pulled his hands free and covered his face. "Iduna," he moaned. "I've lied. I've lied to you. I love you, and I've lied to you. I'm doomed."

"You love me? What lie? What are you talking about? Did you say you love me?"

"You don't understand. The food... I can't cook. I never could." His voice became quiet and he dropped his hands from his face. "It was all a trick. All thanks to the budeh."

"Poody? What's poody?"

"Budeh," Roland corrected her softly. He was calmer now, his resignation drawing the last passion from his voice. "Budeh, the magic spice. That's what made the food so wonderful. I brought it from Farfell. Now it's gone, ended, and I'm destroyed."

"Is this why you needed the time alone? That last moment before you served the food?"

Roland nodded, forcing himself to look at Iduna, at the face he had come to love. Her eyes were sparkling, and there were wrinkles at the corners, the ones that appeared when she thought something was funny. She grabbed a piece of potato from one of the bowls.

"Open," she said, coming toward him. Roland was too surprised to do anything but obey. She put the potato into his mouth, her fingers brushing his lips as she did. "You know this stuff is no good, and so do I," she said smiling, "but there's a hundred people outside who know this meal was

prepared by Roland, son of Terrestina, the greatest cook in all the land. They're hungry, and we're going to feed them."

She stuck her head out the door. "Maddy, bring your helpers. It's time for people to eat."

Roland chewed the potato. Actually it was good. Really good. It took him back to the time so many weeks ago when he and Teller shared his first, simple meal. Iduna returned to his side and took his hand. He could feel the butter on her fingers as they tangled with his. He raised her hand to his lips.

J. Lee Strickland is a freelance writer living in upstate New York. In addition to fiction, he has written on the subjects of rural living, modern homesteading and voluntary simplicity. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Sixfold, Atticus Review, Jenny, Latchkey Tales, Scarlet Leaf Review, Workers Write!, Mad Scientist Journal, Pure Slush, Small Farm Journal, and others. He served as a judge for the 2015 and 2016 story South Million Writers Awards. He is at work on a collection of connected short stories vaguely similar in format to the long-defunct American television series 'Naked City' but without the salacious title.

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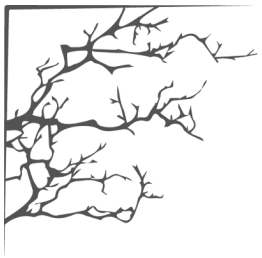

Open Window
Lucy Palmer

HE’S SLEEPING IN HIS chair in front of the TV, mouth open, skin moon-luminous, jaw chiseled from calcite, hair tousling soft over golden cheeks. He’s everything she thought she wanted once, a man with molecules fashioned from moonbeams. There was a time when his lack of shadow didn’t bother her at all; she didn’t care that where he walked, no shaded-self followed.

Now she resents his absolute light. Without his dark, his gleam blinds her. He does everything for her: brushes her hair, brings her tea, hides the newspaper so she doesn’t get distressed, runs her herbal baths, anoints her feet with oil, and feeds her cakes as she lies away the days on the sofa. But she’s forgetting how to move, how to live, and now she’s had enough. ‘You can be *too* perfect,’ she thinks as she heads to the kitchen to bake him a cake of her own.

She turns the oven on and gathers the flour, the eggs, and the butter into a bowl, then heads out into the dark night with a Tupperware container. She plucks a night lizard from the wall of the herb garden, a leaf from the darkest azalea tree, a moth that fizzes in the lamplight outside the front door, and, for good measure, a large cockroach that scuttles not quite fast enough across the peeling stucco of the front wall.

Inside, she takes the lizard and slowly peels the skin from its body, apologizing to the tiny creature as she goes, for she is no monster. She places the silvery scales into the flour mix and stirs well; takes the azalea leaf and crinkles it into the mix; takes the moth and flakes in its dusty wings; then takes the cockroach and rips its tiny legs off one by one, letting them fall like tiny soldiers into the bowl.

She finds her husband’s muffin tins, fills them with her crepuscular mix, then puts them in the oven to bake. When they’re done, she brings one to him in his chair, softly waking him with a kiss on one flawless cheek. He smiles broadly at his wife, amber eyes wide as if surprised to

see her on her feet, takes the cake from her and eats it with gusto, washing it down with sweet mint tea.

He doesn't even complain about the chewy bits.

In bed that night she waits to see what will happen. He's sleeping again, his skin aglow. She doesn't know what she expected, but nothing has changed. After a few hours, she's so exhausted that she counts his long, beautiful eyelashes instead of sheep, and, in moments, she's out like a light.

The next morning, she wakes to find him suffused in an even more dazzling light, as if tiny fireflies had taken up residency inside each perfect pore overnight. His light is even more pronounced against the black of the sheet. But... hold on. Their sheets are white, the woman realizes with a start. She sits up and is horrified to find the darkness is spilling from her. Her own shadow is growing, groaning, is doubling, tripling in size before her eyes, gathering speed as it creeps out of the bed and towards the window. She screams out as she's dragged from her bed by its dreadful fingers and regrets leaving the window open as the shadow pulls her writhing frame out of the window and onto the hard earth below. Meanwhile, he sleeps on, dreaming golden dreams, smiling his golden smile.

Lucy Palmer is an English writer and poet living in California. Her poetry has appeared in By&By Poetry, The Pickled Body, Unbroken, and others. Her flash fiction has appeared in The Radvocate and is forthcoming in the Cherry Tree Journal. She was nominated for Best Small Fictions 2017.

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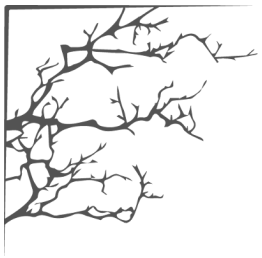

Maria Morevna and the Deathless One

S.L. Scott

MANY STORIES TELL OF those that dwell in the mysterious Caucasus Mountains. The dark sorcerer, Koshchey the Deathless One, who commanded the winds and terrorized any foolish enough to fall into his power. The forlorn princess, Maria Morevna, who waited for a hero to bring her home. The witch, Baba Yaga, who was sometimes savior, sometimes doom. Each retelling took the tales further from their beginnings or the truth within, as stories tend to do. Some have forgotten how the princess refused to stand idle, how the evil sorcerer had a weakness for beautiful things, or how the witch loved to meddle in the lives of interesting people. But this tale begins at the princess's home. Though that too is a lie, for she was no princess at all, merely the daughter of a minor lord, not that she was mere in anything else.

With hair dark as tilled earth and eyes that burned with an arrogant will, Maria Morevna far surpassed her four elder sisters in every way. Suitors travelled for days to woo her, and she seduced them all into her thrall, basking in their attention. She toyed with them and reveled in their devotion, but submitted to none. She was not one of her sisters, willing to sit like a doll to be posed—never speaking, never thinking. Maria Morevna knew she was destined for more. The man she would stand next to would see her as his equal and be worthy himself. She didn't know who he was, but he existed. She felt the certainty deep inside herself like a rope pulling her through murky waters into the unknown.

Beauty, though, would be fleeting, and not wanting to see his most prized daughter wasted as a spinster or a whore, Maria Morevna's father chose her husband before she lost her value. So, like her sisters before her, Maria Morevna was sold to a neighboring lord older than her father for

land, cattle, and gold. A wizened old fool who wanted nothing more than soft and supple flesh to fall into at night, who was unworthy of her destiny.

"Father," she said, standing before him as strong and firm as the son he dreamed about but never received. "I'll never go. Give me time and I'll find a man worthy of me."

"Men do not need to be worthy of a woman," her father chided. "You should strive to be more like your sisters. They may not have your beauty, but they knew how to show their worth to their husbands: silently."

"That's submission, not worth!" she screamed with a demon's voice ringing of power.

"Submission is worth," her father said. "That is why you haven't married yet, and why I picked a man who hasn't met you. He can't return you now that the deal is done."

"I haven't married because I refuse to be bound to anyone beneath me." She stared her father down, becoming the original to his cracked reflection of her strength. "I won't go."

But she did go, bound and gagged, her strength invisible to those who refused to acknowledge it. Her new lord's guards took care not to blemish his prize any more than the red burns where the ropes twisted and cut into Maria Morevna's skin. She tried to escape many times. She stabbed one in the arm with the handle of her spoon, blood dripping down the broken wood of the utensil as she lunged for his sword to cut her bindings. They fed her with dirty fingers after that. They chased her through the woods another night after she feigned "womanly issues" while attending to nature. From then on, they leashed her like a dog each time her legs were unbound and watched her squat.

Despite her efforts, they continued high into the mountains and away from any chance of escape that didn't include death. The guards slowed as they climbed a narrow path, a cold unnatural to the season biting through their clothes. Maria Morevna felt her horse's fear in its muscles that strained with each unsure step up the deceptive ground. She looked out to the sheer drop beside them and listened to the shrieking winds that pushed them forward, toward a fate that was not her own.

"I could escape into you," she whispered to the wind as it danced above the emptiness. "Better to choose my destiny than live someone else's life."

As if it heard her, the wind stopped, and for a moment Maria Morevna swore she saw a hand take hold of the horse's reins.

The soft patter of pebbles falling was the only warning before a tempest thrashed the travelers and stripped the mountainside stone by stone until the ridge fell away beneath their feet. The horse and rider behind Maria Morevna tumbled down into the darkness below, while ahead of her, the other's frightened beast reared up and brought its iron hooves down, splitting the guard's skull and dragging his body the few frantic steps before the ridge gave way.

Maria Morevna gripped her horse's thick body and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the inevitable. But they didn't fall. A wind, solid as flesh, stood sentinel against them, supporting the horse while it galloped as steadily over the collapsing ridge as it would a clear pasture.

When the horse's stride slowed and the gale around them eased, Maria Morevna felt the ropes binding her loosen. She straightened up and, tossing away the severed ropes, searched her surroundings. The narrow mountain pass was barely visible behind her, and in front of her the beaten path curved unnaturally around a wood grove, as if the earth itself cowered at their presence. Still she searched, feeling a freedom in herself more than mere release from her bindings. Something was here, something that kept her horse sure-footed when the ground failed it. But all she caught was a glimpse of a broken silhouette disappearing into the forest.

Maria Morevna needed only a moment to make her decision. Returning to her father or husband-to-be would mean only isolation and obscurity, and the danger of following that shadow didn't frighten her, because for the first time she felt whole. Her bindings may have been cut, but the rope drawing her to her destiny had never been tighter. Wherever those woods led—to dream or demon or damnation itself—it was where she was meant to be.

Maria Morevna kicked the horse into a run and entered the dark woods, not caring when the low branches ripped at her clothes and tore at her skin. Moving as an ever-present guide, the wind led her through the trees until finally sunlight broke through the canopy and the woods thinned. There, like a dagger thrust into the mountainside, stood a castle she hadn't seen from the other side. The mountain peaks hid the towers that reached into the sky. There were no shutters on any of the windows and each was large enough for a man to stand in. She urged the horse closer.

At the castle gate she found the shadow she'd chased was a man. He handed off the reins of a horse whiter than the snow-capped mountain above them before turning to watch her approach. His eyes flashed like lightning in a storm, and when he held his hand out, Maria Morevna felt the winds rise to greet her. A god made flesh. And as she dismounted, her old life nothing more than a forgotten dream, she knew she would one day be a goddess beside him.

"Not many can follow me," her god spoke with thunder rolling across the skies. "Do you know whose power you're in now?"

She shook her head.

He reached forward and curled his long, gaunt fingers around her throat. "I am Koshchey."

Everyone who lived beneath the Caucasus Mountains knew that name, though most thought him nothing more than a legend to scare children. Maria Morevna straightened her back, so that she could speak without his grip blocking her. "You're the Deathless One?"

"Yes," he said, seemingly pleased by her recognition. "Do you fear me?"

Maria Morevna shook her head as best she could beneath his grip, firm but not constraining. "No."

Koshchey chuckled a slow crackle of fire. "You should."

"Why would I fear my destiny?" Maria Morevna asked. "I belong here. Isn't that why you protected me?"

Koshchey leaned in and licked the blood dripping from a cut on her cheek. The flames she'd heard in his voice ignited inside her the moment his tongue touched her skin, spreading unchecked through her body until each cut from the forest ride burned to smooth, unblemished flesh. When he spoke again, it was a devil's whisper in her ear. "I enjoy beautiful things."

Releasing her, Koshchey turned to enter his castle with Maria Morevna a step behind. The interior was as impressive as the sorcerer: gilded tapestries woven into the stone, jewel-laden furniture, ivory handles on every door. Each servant they passed, man and woman alike, rivaled Maria Morevna in beauty and grace. One of the servants led her away further down the maze of halls to a room with a large stone bath with rose petals in the water. There the servant bathed her, rubbed her down with oils until her skin shimmered in the firelight, then dressed her in fine silks and

jewels. She stood a queen. Then the servant gave her a silver tray filled with wine and meats so succulent juice bubbled from its browned and cracked surface. In swift silence, she ushered Maria Morevna up a spiraling tower to their master's bedchamber where she fed his every appetite until the morning sun warmed them to a content slumber.

Days passed to weeks and weeks to months of passion and luxury so blissful Maria Morevna didn't easily see the truth of her role. Day and night she waited on his summons, his every command fulfilled without question, just as the servants around her did. All beautiful, all dressed in finery that made kings blush. But as her novelty wore off, so did the times Koshchey called her to his bed. And if she was not in his bed each night, she was in his kitchen. She was no longer special; she never was. Maria Morevna couldn't satisfy his desires, because he desired none of them beyond the pleasure they offered and their unyielding obedience. She'd become no better than the suitors she used to tease and taunt in her father's home.

But Maria Morevna refused to be unseen by her god. She *would* be desired the way she deserved to be, the way she desired him. She had been ignored too many times; she would not allow the only man equal to her to do the same. Nothing would deny her the glory she felt inside.

One afternoon as Koshchey handed over her emerald gown and bid her to leave, Maria Morevna balked. Her voice never wavered, a goddess speaking to a god. "Look at me."

A storm brewed in the sorcerer's eyes, and with a flick of his hand the door slammed open. "I'm done with you for now. Go."

"No!" she screamed, refusing to be ignored by the one she'd chosen. "I am Maria Morevna. I am more than a servant or a whore, and you will see me as such." She would never be silent again.

The storm in his eyes turned tempest in the room and the winds that had once protected her now trapped her. Koshchey's magic twisted and tore like thorny vines growing inside her body. "*You* are nothing but a toy to amuse me," he hissed, closing the distance so he could squeeze her throat with his long, gaunt fingers. "*I* am Koshchey the Deathless, ruler of the Caucasus Mountains, and *no one* orders me."

With her dangling from his iron grip, Koshchey paraded Maria Morevna through the castle. The servants, all those less worthy than she, watched her feet squirm in the air, struggling to find purchase that wasn't

there. Then, with all the care the servants might show the night's chamber pot, Koshchey tossed Maria Morevna out the castle gate. Whatever infatuation he once held for her was lost beneath the same condemnation she once showed the boy-suitors who asked for her hand. "Give her rags to wear," he ordered, "let her wander and die alone in the darkness."

A servant brought Maria Morevna a soiled smock as she waited at the castle gate, too shocked to leave. She'd finally found where she was destined to be, the only man in the world worthy of her, and he cast her back into obscurity. He dismissed *her*, like her father did, like her husband-to-be would have, like she did to those less worthy. "No!" she screamed as rage replaced confusion. "I belong here. You are my equal!"

The air turned stale and lightning spider-webbed across the sky. Koshchey turned, though he did not approach her again. Around him the servants cowered or ran from the room. When he spoke, it was the quiet terror that beckoned the coming storm. "I have no equal."

He waved a single hand and a gale struck her hard. Maria Morevna tumbled over and over, hitting trees and ripping through brush as the wind dispatched her into the dark woods. When she could finally stand again, she was alone, blood dripping from her arms and shaking legs, and the edge of the forest nowhere in sight. Not only had he not seen the truth, but he rejected her. How could someone so like her be as blind as the others? She stumbled barefoot over bristle bushes and upturned roots, but as the hours passed, she knew she'd never find the castle again. She may not have had Koshchey's magic, but she understood him like no other, and she would never have allowed one she thought unworthy to return.

What had taken minutes on a horse with the wind's sure trail to follow turned into cold, hungry days with barely any light breaking through the thick canopy. She wasn't certain how long she'd been wandering when the trees thinned to a small clearing. On the far side was the strangest hut Maria Morevna had ever looked upon. The hut itself appeared simple, with a thatched roof and a door-less entrance to a small, single room. But that unassuming home balanced atop two giant chicken legs, currently crouched down as if the hut itself slept. Nearby worked an old crone, thin as a skeleton and hair a dirty white. She hunched over a giant mortar, grinding something inside with a stone pestle as tall as the woman herself.

"Don't lurk in the dark, child," the crone squawked, not bothering to look up from her work. "Come out and help an old witch. Bring me that

comfrey.”

Numbed from the days of wandering, Maria Morevna obeyed, plucking the wilted blossoms from the ground. While the witch added the flowers to the mortar, Maria Morevna knelt beside her, too weary to stand any longer. The simple act of resting made her body ache and relax all at once. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’ve been called many names, but I know myself to be Baba Yaga. And you, child, you have the taste of Koshchey’s magic about you. Why are you out here?”

“He doesn’t understand I’m meant to be with him,” she answered, as if compelled to by the woman’s screechy voice. “He dismissed me.”

“Many are meant to be with him, beautiful ones like you. He makes certain of that.”

The indignation rose again inside Maria Morevna. “I am tired of being compared to others, expected to be like others. I am so much more than them. He’s the only man who understands what it means to be more, and only he is worthy enough to be with me. Why doesn’t he understand I’m meant to stand at his side? *I* am his equal.”

Baba Yaga let loose a strangled laugh that twisted like a dying cat. “Equal to Koshchey? He believes himself better than mortal man. No wonder he cast you out.”

Maria Morevna rose, outrage erasing all weakness from her body. “I *am* his equal. Whether I’m in mud or silk doesn’t change that.”

Baba Yaga paused in her grinding. “Why do you want to return to someone who cast you out?”

The rope inside Maria Morevna that drew her to Koshchey, which showed her what her true destiny was, tugged in only one direction. “Because there is no one else worthy of me, and I will not be dismissed again. He will see my worth.”

The old witch’s coal eyes penetrated deeper into Maria Morevna’s soul than any magic could touch. In a voice that crackled of brimstone, the witch asked, “And how will you show him?”

“If I knew how, I’d do anything.”

“If you don’t know, you can’t. But what if I give you the chance?” Baba Yaga shook her ragged nest of hair and two bodiless hands appeared in the air before Maria Morevna. One wore a bracelet of gold and rubies on its short wrist, the other a simple ring of silver tightened around its

middle finger. “Choose one. The bracelet can protect you from his magic for as long as you wear it. The ring can give you one moment of magic, whatever magic your imagination can conjure. Which do you need to make him see?”

Maria Morevna felt the cold fire of Baba Yaga’s power flickering against her skin as the hands tantalized her with gilded hope. “Why would a witch want to help me?”

The crone’s barnacled tongue escaped through the gap in her still-rotting teeth. “I’ve not seen passion like that since Koshchey himself crossed my path. I’m curious what you’ll do. And if you succeed, perhaps I’ll come calling on you one day. So do you choose the chance of greatness or wander until you die?”

Hesitant fingers caressed the smooth ornaments. The wrong choice would indeed lead to her death; she wouldn’t spare an imposter twice, and neither would Koshchey. But as reasonable—as safe—as the protection the bracelet offered was, Maria Morevna slipped the ring from the waiting finger and placed it on her own. The silver warmed and pulsed with power, embracing her flesh like a lover.

“Interesting choice,” Baba Yaga said, and the hands disappeared into the nothingness they came from. Reaching her bony arm into the mortar’s deep well, she brought up a powder as fine as ash and held it before Maria Morevna. “Use it well.”

In one deep breath the powder engulfed Maria Morevna. She reeled back, clawing desperately as the blinding powder dug into her eyes. Slowly, when the pain diminished and tears washed the dust away, she gazed into the sunlight haloing Koshchey’s castle. The witch had returned her, now she had to make it hers.

Confidence and certainty were her only allies. She had no plan, not even the smallest hint at how to use Baba Yaga’s gift to prove her worth, but she’d do it. If she had to gut Fate with her own two hands, she would have her destiny.

She tore the filthy smock from her body; Maria Morevna needed no dressing or treatment to show her majesty. The first time she’d entered his castle like a puppy behind its master, this time she demanded attention as its mistress, head held high above the confused servants watching her claim what was hers. If Koshchey believed himself above all mortals, then she was as well, and Maria Morevna would not mistake it again.

The door behind her rang like thunder as a burst of wind slammed it to splinters behind her. Koshchey's power filled the room, suffocating her, but she remained firm. He closed his dark eyes and breathed in, searching for something untouchable by human means. "Baba Yaga will answer to me for sending you back here."

"You will listen to me," Maria Morevna commanded, refusing to even wince as the wind beat against her bare body. "You're the only man worthy of me, and I'm the only woman equal to you. I belong at your side."

Death rode on his frozen gaze, creeping closer to her with every word she spoke. "No human is equal to me."

A smile as pure as the devil's first blush curled onto her lips. "There are none equal to me either."

The magic ring scorched her finger as the power expelled, dispersing Koshchey's hold on her and spreading to every man and woman watching. One by one they collapsed to their knees and bowed their heads. She had to show him, had to prove their connection, and as the ring glowed in the flame of borrowed magic, she knew how. Koshchey's eyes widened as Maria Morevna pulled a rope of woven blood from her chest with one hand, and with the other broke through the skin and muscle and bone to grasp his beating heart. Unbidden, the blood rope wound around her arm and into his body, encircling his heart.

"I am as far above mortal man as you are. You will never dismiss me again."

Maria Morevna pulled her arm out, and the silver ring disappeared along with any proof the magic occurred at all. The rope was gone; Koshchey was once again whole. For a long, silent moment nothing stirred. He took a deep breath and, feeling what she did, watched her with new eyes. Then the wind surrounded her, caressed her, drew her close. For the first time he saw Maria Morevna—the goddess—and when he kissed her, desire struck like lightning and lit a flame of passion never quenched again.

"What was your name again?" he asked.

She laughed, a nightingale in the darkness. "Maria Morevna."

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The Falling Angels of Fifty-Six

CL Bledsoe

THE FIRST IMPACT CAME just before dawn, according to the glowing light of Ballard's wrist watch. It was the only light he allowed himself in the still darkness of the cave. Anything more and his father would've ranted about technology being the cause. Maybe it was; who the hell knew. The impact hadn't woken him; his body woke automatically before the impacts started each day. He'd opened his eyes to a darkness so palpable he found himself reaching out to touch it, like he could brush it aside and find behind it something profound, an answer to questions he didn't even know how to ask. Images came to his mind's eye as he lay in the void: faces, memories, strange, abstract things he could make no sense of. When it came, the thud was muffled, though it shook the earthen walls and brought dust down onto Ballard and his few possessions.

After it fell, he counted until the next strike, the way his grandfather had taught him to count between lightning crashes. He didn't know if it actually worked, but he counted to 20 before he heard the next one. And then 40. And then five, which told him the count was meaningless.

One hit what felt like right above him, shaking the whole cave and bringing down even more dust and debris. He held his breath to hear if the roof would collapse, but it held. It woke Ballard's father though, and the old man began to curse the darkness.

"Sons of bitches! Come and get me!" Most of what he said was incomprehensible, and he paused after his first yell probably to take a swig from his whisky. It didn't matter. The things were dead when they fell; that was one of the last things the scientists had been able to determine.

Ballard was covered in dust, so he rolled off the mattress. He'd found if he didn't get moving early, he'd lay in bed all day, feeling as dark as the cave. That's what his father did. Once he finished yelling, the old man

would be in tears, begging God to take him up to join Ballard's mother. It was a fucking joke.

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When he was a boy, like most boys, Ballard fell in love with the dead beasts who'd terrorized the world in eons past and been killed by rocks from the sky. He'd argued with classmates, family members—an aunt, especially, who claimed there'd been no dinosaurs because they weren't mentioned in the good book. She'd claimed what scientists found was just chicken bones and the like—Ballard remembered that quote exactly. He'd laughed, thinking himself superior because of his regurgitated wisdom.

"You don't know as much as you think you do," she'd said, which had just made him laugh harder at the ignorance she wrapped herself in like a warm blanket. There'd been many worlds before this one, he'd argued, all collated and explained by science, wiped clean not by divine floods but by random circumstance. Meteors, he'd argued. That was the thing, not angels. How wrong he'd been.

But what scientist could've foreseen this? What Christian? His aunt would've said it was God's will showing him the folly of his arrogance. But what kind of God would lay waste to a planet just to prove a point to one person? Still, a part of him still played with the idea that it was all for his benefit, somehow. This brought with it a profound guilt.

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He cleaned himself in the dark, using water sparingly. Before, he might've spent 20 minutes or more luxuriating in the warmth of the shower. He'd even let the water run while he brushed his teeth just to hear the noise of it draining away. He thought of the weight of all those wasted gallons now that he had to haul water in for his own use and for his father, though the old man rarely bathed. A lesser mind might've said that lesson was the reason for all this. If that was the case, it certainly revealed the nature of reality to be an arbitrary and cruel thing.

He poured a small amount of water into a pitcher, soaked a cloth in it, and wiped himself off, squeezing out the dirtied water in a pot which he'd take to his garden.

He opened a can of beans and ate it cold, then took another can to his father, who'd passed out in bed.

The glow of Ballard's headlamp, or maybe the sound of his footsteps, woke the old man.

“What in hell do you want? Turn the damned light out before they see it!”

“They can’t see it, Dad; we’re underground,” Ballard said.

“Maybe they can see through the ground. Maybe they can see your sinful thoughts.” The old man’s face was cruel, the dark circles around his eyes deepened by shadow.

“Then the light won’t matter.” Ballard set the can of beef stew beside his father’s bed. “Brought you some food,” he said.

His father swiped at it and knocked the can to the floor. This was why it wasn’t open.

“Going out for supplies,” Ballard said. “I’ll try to be back as soon as I can.” Ballard picked up the can, turned on his heel, and left without responding to his father’s mutters. He put the can back on the shelf in the kitchen area and made an x on the calendar beside the three other Xs when his father hadn’t eaten.

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There was a crawlspace past the kitchen his old man wouldn’t go near because he was afraid he’d get stuck in it and starve to death or be eaten by cave rats. Ballard crawled the ten or so feet through the narrow opening, pushing the water bucket ahead of him, until he could hear the hum of the generator in the other room of the cave and see the glow. When he was able to straighten up, the walls of this room were thick with perspiration and lined with lights he’d salvaged from a friend’s indoor marijuana growing operation. The biggest problem was the coldness of the cave, which he offset with heaters to keep the plants alive. He needed the cave’s protection, though, so even though this required a lot of gas for the generator, he didn’t have a choice.

He’d never had a green thumb, but he tended the plants carefully, referring to books he’d salvaged from the library whenever a plant didn’t seem as healthy as it should be or wasn’t growing. It worked surprisingly well, actually. He picked a tomato and ate it. It tasted bland, but he still felt a thrill eating something he’d grown. He’d hit the books later, he resolved, and see if he could find any information to help.

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At the mouth of the cave, he couldn’t see any new damage. He checked his watch. It was getting near noon. After ten or so they usually stopped falling. He scanned the dreary sky and saw nothing, so he put one tentative

foot outside with a thrill as though the falling things were waiting like some horror movie villain. Nothing happened. He calmed himself and stepped out and made his way down the path to the bridge that led to what had once been the visitor's center.

He was greeted by a fresh strike, probably the one he'd felt so sharply. It had hit the bridge spanning the trickle they called a stream that crossed the path from the cave to the visitor's center, maybe 100 feet from the cave. The angel had knocked a big chunk out of the bridge as it fell, then dug a hole in the bed. Ballard climbed down to investigate, carefully avoiding the booby traps he'd built from survival manuals he'd found. He wasn't sure they actually would work, but he didn't want to test them on himself. In the creek bed, he could see the angel a few feet down. They looked like sleeping people. The thing was, it was in pretty good shape. He didn't understand that; why hadn't it burned up in the atmosphere? Why hadn't it vaporized on impact? His aunt would've called that faith.

He pulled his homemade Geiger counter from his backpack and waved it over the body. There was a theory going around right after the strikes started that they were radioactive. That would be bad news for the water supply, but according to the counter this one was okay. That's assuming the counter worked the way the book had said it would. Faith.

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The nearest town was nothing—a restaurant he'd long since looted and a couple houses gone to rubble. It was called Fifty-Six. There were stories as to how that happened, but Ballard didn't know if any of them were true. He'd heard it was the population at the time they became a town. A popular joke was that it was the average IQ.

Ballard rarely saw anyone in his outings. He figured most of the inhabitants had fled north. The people he did encounter weren't the type Ballard hoped to see again.

Mountain View was the nearest town with any size, though it'd only had a couple thousand people. It was about a half-hour away. Ballard debated searching the wreckage of Fifty-Six and risking a drive into town-proper. They were low on food and everything else. They always were, though.

He started the truck without having decided. It had a sun roof which he'd cut himself; a neat square of open metal with clear plastic bolted across so he could see the sky enough to avoid any direct strikes. There

wasn’t a library in Fifty-Six, but there was one at the county school in Mountain View. He’d gotten quite a few useful books there, and then he remembered something: there was a door at the school he hadn’t been able to get open. It was off the cafeteria, and he had been without tools before.

He needed a crowbar. He drove, trying to watch both the road and the sky, until he saw a house and pulled into the driveway. There was a shed in the back he saw from the road, so he drove directly to it. There was no sign of movement from the house. He got out his shotgun and held it up just in case anyone was watching. The shed door was locked, but he kicked it open. Inside, there was a lot of junk. There were tools on the back wall. The sky was clear, so he made for the back wall. There was a sledgehammer which might do the trick. He took a couple flathead screwdrivers, too.

Back outside, he saw one—a speck with a cone of heat around it, heading straight down. He hesitated, unsure whether he should run or hunker down, when movement in the house caught his eye—it was a curtain shifting. He yelled and pointed up. It was closer, and Ballard could see it was coming right for the house.

“Angel’s coming,” he hollered and ran towards the house, but not quick enough. The thing smacked into the roof with a noise and force that made Ballard dive under his truck.

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He crawled to his feet, feeling sore but not broken, and stumbled over to the house. It was a big old farmhouse, three stories tall, but now the roof was bowed down in a jagged V. It looked like the roof was going to fall in any second. Bits of shingles and wood were falling off.

“Anybody in there?” Ballard called out.

He went to the front door and banged on it. The knob was locked, or at least wouldn’t open. He sidestepped over to a busted window and clambered in over the broken glass, yelling for survivors. There was dust in the air. He searched the lower level and found nothing, so he braved the stairs, until he reached the top and saw the damage.

He found her maybe 15 feet from the stairs under a piece of what had once been the ceiling. She was coughing and crying. She eyed him malevolently with her legs pinned under debris. He recognized her from school but couldn’t place her name right away. He searched around in the dim light until he found a chair and used it to pry the weight off of her

enough for her to pull herself out. As soon as she was free, she was on her feet, back against the rubble. He dropped the chair and put his hands up, palms toward her.

“Delilah, I’m just trying to help,” he said as her name came to him. That didn’t seem to calm her down much. “I saw the angel fall, and I saw you move the curtain in the window.” She was eying the debris, probably looking for a weapon. “I have a safe place,” he said. “I’m going outside before this place falls in. Come if you want.”

The sky was clear outside. Ballard dug out some supplies and spread them on the hood of his truck, complete with two paper plates, utensils, and two bottles of water. He heard her step up beside him but didn’t comment. Instead, he grabbed a can of peaches, twisted the opener around the top, and then set it back on the hood. He set a sleeve of crackers beside them and then his piece de resistance, a hunk of cheese. He did pause before digging a pocket knife out, wiping it on his leg, and setting it beside the cheese.

“You hungry?” he asked.

Her eyes went wide, but quickly narrowed. Ballard got a cracker, cut a piece of cheese to put on it, and popped it in his mouth. He speared a peach from the can and sucked it from the fork.

“Sorry I don’t have more,” he said. She crossed her arms and affected a look of disinterest, but her eyes were still on the food.

“I can’t eat all this,” Ballard said. “You’d be doing me a favor.” She didn’t respond, so he shrugged and whittled off another hunk of cheese. He put it on a cracker and offered it to her, but she just stared at it like it was moldy. Ballard shrugged and popped it in his mouth.

There was an overgrown field behind the ruins of her house. Ballard kept an eye on the sky, but there didn’t seem to be any imminent danger falling. Behind him he heard the subtle crinkle of the plastic sleeve. He fought against the urge to spin around and yell, “Ah-ha!” He heard another crinkle and let her chew before he spoke.

“What’d your folks grow?” he asked. “Wheat?”

“Corn,” she said. “Soybeans.”

“Everybody grows soybeans,” he said.

“What do you know about it?” He turned and caught her suck a peach down. She stared back defiantly. “Your dad was a park ranger.”

“He still is,” he said, but she didn’t even blink. “I know everybody grows soybeans.” She shrugged and kept eating. “Field looks pretty good,” he added. “Y’all ever think about trying to keep growing?”

She snorted. “Nobody would work a field these days. And them things would just ruin it.”

“Field looks pretty untouched.”

She didn’t answer.

He came back to the truck and finished the few crackers she left. He crumpled up the trash, stuck it back in his bag, and put all this in the glove box. The girl dropped some cheese rinds on the ground. He picked those up and added them to the trash.

“You afraid of getting a ticket?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. “You coming? Let’s go.” He swung up into the cab, started it and let it idle until the passenger door opened. Without a word, she climbed in.

Ballard caught himself looking at her and stopped, figuring it would make her even less friendly if she thought he was a goon. He noticed she was dirty and thin.

“You still hungry? There’s a granola bar in the glove box.” He reached and opened it.

She eyed him like a stray dog but took one out and devoured the thing in about three seconds.

“You probably shouldn’t eat the wrapper, too,” he said and grinned.

She didn’t answer.

“There’s another one in there if you want it,” he said. She waited a few seconds before she wolfed that one down, too.

“Why you being nice?” she asked. “I ain’t got nothing you can have.” She drew herself up into a tight ball.

“Was it just you in the house?” He asked. “You got any family we should be looking for?”

“Where are you going?” she asked instead of answering. Her voice was angry and wary.

“High School,” Ballard said. She looked at him like he was crazy. “Looking for supplies,” he added. Just then, he pointed out the windshield and they watched one fall in the distance. When it hit, they heard the boom and saw a cloud of dust rise to further obscure the sun.

“Bastards,” she said.

“It’s dead,” he said, though he wasn’t sure why.

“Good.”

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The high school shared a playground with the junior high, elementary, and primary schools, so that the lower schools’ end was littered with overgrown monkey bars and jungle gyms that resembled jungle ruins.

“Look on my works ye mighty and despair,” Ballard said. She looked at him like he was crazy. “*Ozymandias*. It’s a poem. From Ms. Draper’s class.”

“You always were a nerd.” Delilah snorted.

It had been a fairly small school with fewer than two hundred students per grade, fed by several small communities in the area. Most of the kids had shared classes since kindergarten, but when the angels started falling, everything changed. Ballard realized it had been about six months since he’d last been to school, which was when he probably saw her last.

“You were friends with Tommy and them, weren’t you?” Ballard asked. “Heard anything about him or Keith lately?”

She shook her head. “Haven’t seen hardly anybody in a long time. Haven’t wanted to. Why you asking about them?” She looked at him.

“We used to be buddies years ago.” Ballard realized it felt like eons had passed he and Tommy had been friends. For Ballard’s fifth grade birthday party out at the state park, Tommy had given him a Twisted Sister album and he, Keith, and Ballard had snuck away from the birthday party, broke into the park office, and called phone sex numbers just to giggle at what they heard.

She snorted. “He thought you were a queer.”

“People grow apart.” Ballard reddened. “I would think a bunch of potheads wouldn’t be so judgmental.”

That shut her up. She turned back to the window and sneered at the grass. Ballard cut the engine and took the keys out.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What are *we* doing,” he said. “Time to earn your keep.”

He slammed the door behind him and made his way through the weeds to the glass doors. They were closed, which was a good sign. He didn’t see any sign of a strike to this building, though he noticed the primary school across the playground was nearly leveled, and there was a gaping hole at the intermediate school’s drop off lane.

The door was locked. This was a good sign. There was a loud thunk and he stepped back as a rock bounced off the now-cracked glass of the door and landed at his feet. He turned to see Delilah with a disappointed look on her face.

"See this? That looks like chicken-wire?" Ballard gestured at the reinforced glass. "That makes it hard to break." She picked up another rock and threw it with the same result. When that didn't work, she picked up one of them and started beating on the glass, which cracked.

"Yeah," she said. "I figured a rock. ..."

"Yeah. No." He took off around the side of the building.

"Where you going?" He heard her still banging the glass for a while but ignored it as he busied himself finding a back door. It was around the side, but also locked. Ballard really wasn't that good at picking locks. On TV they make it look easy, but as far as he could tell, it was really a matter of trial and error. He had a little lock pick kit he'd put together with some pins and a little dentist's tooth cleaning tool. He worked on the door until he heard footsteps and looked up to see Delilah with what he realized was her usual "you're an idiot" look on her face.

"What are you doing?"

He turned back to the doorknob. "What's it look like?"

"Why don't you use that sledgehammer you stole from my daddy?"

He'd leaned it against the wall. "And then anything and anyone could get in."

"So."

He didn't answer and concentrated on the door, jiggling his bits of wire to no real effect. Finally, he stepped back and swung the sledgehammer, knocking the door knob off. The door still wouldn't give, though.

"Come on," Ballard said. He could feel Delilah's eyes on him as he fidgeted with the door.

"Just hit it," she said. "Knock the shit out of it."

He swung the hammer into the door near the hinges and managed to knock it loose. He pushed it open, and it fell free, onto the floor inside.

"Nobody will probably notice," Delilah said.

It was dark inside and smelled of stale sweat.

"Locker room," he said.

He picked up the sledgehammer and stepped in, but she didn't follow.

"Come on," he said. She shook her head.

“One of them might fall. We shouldn’t be out in the day,” she said.

“Last time I went out at night, I nearly got eaten,” he said. “By a person,” he added when she didn’t respond. “People go out in the night, so I go out in the day.”

“Those things fall in the day.”

“Better than dealing with people.” She shook her head. “All right.” He held up his hands. “I’ll go look, and you keep watch. Anything looks amiss, you holler.”

“Anything what?”

“Any bad shit, you scream,” he said. She nodded. He dug out his miner’s helmet and clicked on the light and went inside, a little glad to be rid of her. Even that morning, he’d have given just about anything to meet a girl, but Delilah was kind of being a pain.

He went to the nearest door, which was locked. Inside the building he didn’t care about damage, so he swung the sledgehammer at the knob and popped it right out. The door came open. It was the coach’s office. He ransacked the desk and a shelf and found a first aid kit with bandages and aspirin, which he shoved into his backpack. When he left, he spray-painted a big X on the door.

He walked by the nurse’s office, which he already raided the last time he was there, in order to get to the principal’s office. It still had “Principal Fuck Head” spray-painted on the door from Ballard’s last visit. The door was unlocked, so he went in and shone his light on the spray paint on the walls which detailed all the ways the school had wasted Ballard’s time, in his opinion. His favorite was, “I’ve been smarter than my teachers since I was ten.” He was kind of glad Delilah hadn’t come in with him, actually.

The cafeteria was his real goal, so he headed there. The doors were unlocked but closed. Inside, it was dark and clean. He was a little surprised the staff had cleaned before they left.

In the back, through the double doors, which he opened using the sledgehammer, he found what had once been the hot line. The trays sat naked and empty. Behind them were the ovens and stoves, also spotless and bare. There were shelves with pots, pans, and cooking utensils he didn’t need, and some spices he added to his backpack. He skirted all of that and ducked back past the walk-in cooler and freezer. There was no way anything would’ve survived, so he left that alone.

In the back, past the freezer, was the door he hadn't been able to open before. This time, the sledgehammer opened it, revealing stairs down into the darkness. When he braved them, he found more canned beets, dry beans, cereal, rice, and oats than he'd ever seen outside a grocery store. He was stunned for a moment, and then it hit him how excited he was about something he wouldn't have even looked twice at before. But he pushed that down.

There were two big, metal doors leading outside to the loading dock. Ballard had to pound on some to get open, even from the inside. He left them propped open and went back out to the front. Delilah was at the door, which surprised him so much he froze in the doorway.

"Find anything?" she asked. She seemed in a better mood.

"Yeah, lots," Ballard said, brushing past her and heading for the truck. There was a strike nearby which made him jump.

"Where is it?" she asked as she hopped in. He drove around the side of the building to the loading dock and backed the truck up to the double doors. He cut the engine and hopped out with her still staring at him, waiting for an answer. He disappeared inside and emerged with two massive bags of rice.

"Come on," he said. "It'll take me forever to carry all this." She shook her head again at the prospect, but he turned and faced her square. "Longer we're out here unprotected, the more chance we get hit by one of those things." He went inside and returned, sweating, with several giant cans of food and stowed them in the truck. She watched, and after he returned with another load, this time of boxes of oatmeal mix, she followed.

Together, it took them a half-hour to clear out the storage room. It filled up about half of the truck bed. Ballard closed the doors and drove over to the junior high.

"What are you doing?" Delilah asked.

"Probably just as much in there," he said.

She shook her head vehemently. "It's too dangerous."

He put his arm on the steering wheel and looked at her. "They don't aim, you know. They just fall."

"We've got a good load," she said. "And we're both tired and hungry. You said you have a safe place. We should get this stuff back there and come back for this another time."

"Someone could come get it," he said.

“They haven’t so far.” Her eyes were wide and wet with fear.

“That’s just luck,” Ballard said.

“Let’s just go,” she said. “You’ve got enough.” He couldn’t stop eying the school. “Please.” She put a hand on his arm. “It’s getting late.”

“Shit,” he said. “All right, we’ll come back.”

He backed out, turned around, and headed back for the cave. There was a fresh strike that had completely obliterated the road about a mile from the schools.

“We can get around it,” Ballard said.

The bulk of the road was now a big hole with dust still hanging in the sky. On the left side, the edge of the shoulder still looked passable. But it was bordered close on the right by the crater and on the left by woods and the guardrail. Ballard tried to squeeze through between the hole and the guardrail. The passenger side dipped low and the truck stopped as it bottomed out.

“Shit,” Ballard said. He gunned it but didn’t make any progress, so he killed the engine and grabbed his backpack from the seat. He opened his door as wide as he could but came up against a guardrail. “I think I can get out. What about you?”

“Don’t think so,” she said. “Hurry.”

Ballard rammed the door into the guardrail, unconcerned for the paint job, and slid into the available space. The truck’s frame dug into his back, but he kept pushing until he freed himself with a little grunt. He was rewarded with a scrape on his back, but he ignored it, reached in for his backpack, and walked around the back of the truck. The rear tires were still on land, but the front passenger side tire was in the hole, and the truck’s frame rested on the hole’s edge.

“We just need a piece of wood,” Ballard said. “Under the tire.”

“It ain’t stuck in mud,” Delilah said. “What’s the wood going to rest on?”

“Good intentions,” Ballard said. He cast about in the trees but didn’t find much. He came back to the truck, avoided looking at Delilah, and handed her the keys through the rolled down window. “Get behind the wheel,” he said.

“About time.”

He got in front of the truck.

“Ease it back,” he said. He pushed for all he was worth as she ignored his direction and gunned the hell out of the truck. The front tire caught and climbed onto land as Ballard felt something give in his back. Delilah kept going, though. He struggled to catch his breath and waited for her to stop, but she didn’t.

“Hey,” he said.

She went about ten feet back from the edge of the hole. He walked towards her, feeling exhausted in his bones. She cut the wheel and the truck arced to the side.

“Hey!” he said.

She shifted forward and curved away down the road as Ballard broke into a ragged run, already 15, 20 feet behind her and steadily losing ground.

“Hey!” he said. “I gave you peaches! And cheese!”

The truck made no sign of slowing. Ballard watched the taillights grow faint in the distance and cursed himself.

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Night was settling in as Ballard trudged back to the cave. He’d spent the afternoon slipping into trees or behind houses whenever he heard someone approach. Though he was exhausted, when he saw the park entrance ahead, he broke into a run until he pulled the park service’s reinforced door to behind him and bolted it, shutting himself in with the darkness and quiet of the cave.

His father was in the kitchen, reading and spooning something from a can.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

“Book,” his father said.

Ballard ran his fingers through his hair. “I had some trouble. I lost the truck.”

His father looked up at him like he meant to slap Ballard, but must’ve been aware enough to see the boy’s exhaustion.

“What was it, people?”

He looked down. “Yeah.”

His father nodded sagely. “They know we’re here?”

“Don’t think so. Maybe. I bolted the door good. I’ll set traps in the morning.” Ballard didn’t think he’d ever see Delilah again, really.

“Never put off for tomorrow what you can do today.”

“You do it, then,” Ballard said. “I’m tired.” He grabbed a can of something and didn’t even look at it.

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When he woke, his watch said it was a little after six a.m. He went and checked on his father who was passed out in his own room. Ballard drank some water, ate dry cereal, and decided enough was enough.

He went to the door and found that his father had been busy; there was a stout plank of wood across it, blocking it. Ballard tried it and found it solid enough. There was a piece of paper with a crude map—footsteps drawn in a kind of circle with x’s all around them. Past the door, Ballard nearly stepped into a bear trap and realized that was one of the Xs. His father really had been busy.

Past all of the new booby traps, Ballard got to the bridge and the hole from the recent strike. He climbed down to the edge and shone a flashlight into the darkness below and looked at the angel.

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It took well over three hours of digging to widen the hole enough to get to the body and fasten cables to it. He set up a pulley over a thick tree branch and slowly hauled the corpse up. The truly shocking thing about it was how intact it was. It looked like a sleeping person, except for the wings.

“Not for long,” he said.

There was a maintenance shed near the main building Ballard had put some work into. He’d cut a skylight, covered it with hard plastic, and caulked it in so it wouldn’t leak. It had a good, long table, which is what he needed. He dragged the body in there and climbed up on the table to heft it up, but his energy was gone. He slipped down and bear-hugged to get it up there. It was lighter than he would’ve thought. That was something he meant to investigate.

He laid out a book on anatomy beside it on the table and emptied the rest of his backpack: gloves, a plastic smock, and some other things he’d salvaged.

He also kept a CB radio in the shed, which he turned on. It ran on batteries, which was one thing he found plenty of. There was chatter, mostly brief exchanges that didn’t matter to Ballard. It was noise, though: human noise. He flipped through a few channels until he heard someone

apparently reading a newspaper or some kind of news. He turned it up a little because the guy was talking about the falling angels and their range.

“Several Southern states have been affected including Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia....” he trailed off and Ballard heard a crinkling of paper. “So the Bible Belt, basically.” The paper crinkled again. “Um, leading to hundreds of thousands of refugees. Scientists are still uncertain as to where these angels come from or why they are falling. Studies have indicated that they are dead or at least comatose as they fall because they don’t try to stop themselves. What’s killing them is unknown, but the US military has investigated several ways to stop them including attempting to shoot or blow up the angels before they could inflict damage, but all such actions have been futile. ”

The bone structure in the thing’s face was delicate-looking and thin. Its skin was white—not just pale but white like paper. It was well-muscled—toned, not buff—and its arms extended into wings. Its legs were similarly feathered. He notated all of this in his notebook. The thing was naked, which made Ballard uncomfortable. It was well-endowed like someone in a porno. Ballard imagined the angels humping in air and wondered if there were females. It wasn’t exactly hairy but downy like a bird. But there was a lot of down. Its head, also, had short down. He found a cloth and covered it up.

There were no wounds on its arms or legs or trunk. He propped it up but found none on its back, either.

He didn’t have power to run a saw or anything, so he cut a slit in its chest. Green blood came out.

“Whoa,” Ballard said.

He sliced down the sternum like he’d read in textbooks he got from a trip to the nearest community college’s library. The bones cut easily like they were cardboard. He made an incision in the thing’s leg down to the bone and cut into it with a small handsaw. It was hollow, which explained how light it was. Past the sternum there were lungs and a heart and things that looked like intestines. It looked like a person to Ballard, except for the wings and the down. And the fact that it fell from wherever and wasn’t destroyed.

He rooted through its guts and didn’t find anything, so he tucked them back inside. There was a smell to them he couldn’t quite define: something

like blood with a hint of cheese. Even though it was subtle, it made Ballard want to gag. He stepped to the doorway and breathed deeply. In the distance, he caught the flare of light as another fell and flamed down below his line of sight. He listened for the thud but couldn't hear it.

When he returned to the body, the arm and leg had healed. The incision in its chest was almost healed; just a light cut remained. Ballard dropped his knife and backed away, expecting the thing to jump up and come for him, but it didn't. He looked at the door and at the angel, and finally picked up the knife, stepped up to the body, and cut a gash in its thigh. He stood over it, his eyes going from the cut to the thing's face, until he realized the gash was closing up. He wrote all of this down and then rooted out a pair of wire cutters and snipped a finger off. It took a few minutes, but the finger grew back. He jotted this down and then set the finger in a bowl, measured it, and wrote down the number. Then he moved around to its head and sawed into the skull. A stench poured out of the hole that made Ballard want to vomit, and he had to go all the way outside for a little while. It was putrescence and death on a primal level.

He came back in, held his breath, and cut the skull enough to see inside. The brain was green and rotten. He poked it to see if he could evoke a reaction, but nothing happened. He stepped back to the doorway until the smell cleared, and when he returned, the skull had healed. He measured the severed finger again, and it had tripled in length; it was now a full finger with part of a palm attached.

He wrote in his journal a long time, listing various theories and the pros and cons of each. *Maybe someone or something is cutting these things up like starfish and their parts are what are crashing, and then they grow into new bodies?*

He underlined this twice.

Maybe there's a war in heaven and the demons or whatever are killing angels?

He marked that out.

What if heaven and hell are other dimensions and. . . .

He had nowhere to go with that, so he left it.

After jotting all his theories, he measured the finger again. Now, it was a full hand with part of an arm attached. Before he left, he strapped the body down with rope and chains. He did the same to the hand.

It was early afternoon. Ballard had been putting this off all day, but he felt energized by his discoveries, so he walked out to his second truck, this one parked beside the highway just past the park entrance, started it up, and headed back for the schools.

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The pit was still there, but this time, he made sure to stay on the ground, even though it meant scraping the hell out of his truck, denting the door a little, and knocking off the rearview mirror. He left the high school alone, since he'd already looted it, and headed for the intermediate school. The front door was busted in, when he got there. He took out the handgun he'd gotten from his father and slipped inside as quietly as he could. The cafeteria had been hit. He salvaged some canned potatoes and carrots, but most of the food was gone. He hit the nurse's office and found some bandages. In the teacher's lounge, he found a bunch of coffee, which his dad would like.

When he came out with everything, there were still a couple hours before dark. The primary school was in front of him, but it had taken a direct hit from an angel. He drove around the back and saw that the front, where the classrooms were, had taken most of the damage. He picked the lock on the back door and got it open. Inside, it smelled like dust and that same animal musk from the angel. He went in and scouted around. The smell intensified down the main corridor. He passed doors with children's artwork on them in crayon and finger-paint. He wondered, briefly, if the kids who'd made them were still alive, but let it go.

At the edge of the destruction, he encountered the first angel. It was lying on the floor, dead to the world but whole. Beyond that, he saw another and another. Many lay at off angles. He climbed into the wreckage a little and saw one lying on a desk it should've crushed in landing, when he realized they'd all grown from the bits of one angel that apparently shattered.

He spent some time staring and trying to process what he was seeing, and then he climbed back through the wreckage and went and found the cafeteria. Part of the roof had come down, but he was able to get by and found a door to the kitchen, which was locked. He kicked it twice before he got it open, straining his ankle in the process. This storage room was the same as the others had been, though Ballard felt more nervous going down into it. He gathered several big cans of tomatoes and green beans

and limped them out to his truck, getting it all loaded just before dark. The haul wasn't quite as impressive as that first one had been, but it was a good one. Ballard couldn't shake a feeling of paranoia, though. He eased the truck past the pit as the sun dropped from the sky and raced back to the cave as quickly as he could, ignoring his usual roundabout path intended to confuse any followers.

When he got to the cave he pulled right up to the bridge. It didn't occur to him until he was already out and carrying his first load of supplies to the door that he'd parked beside his own, recently stolen, truck. The traps his father had laid had been swept aside, which only quickened Ballard's pace. The thought that his father had done a piss-poor job hiding them flashed through Ballard's mind, but he brushed it aside and opened the door.

Inside it was dark. Ballard stepped in and listened. He heard voices and ran to the kitchen area of the cave, where the voices seemed to originate, only to find his father and Delilah sitting at the table, talking. They both turned when he stormed in. Ballard's father jumped up.

"What's wrong?" he asked, focusing in on the handgun Ballard held.

Delilah stayed seated, turned, and waved lazily at Ballard.

"Hey Ballard," she said.

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She'd brought the supplies, already unloaded them, and stored them away. She worked on a stew using some canned vegetables and some canned beef. She and Ballard's father chatted while Ballard simply ate. When they were done, his father volunteered him to clean up the dishes, which he did by throwing them all away since they were paper, Styrofoam, or plastic anyway.

"So you went to school with my boy?" Ballard's father asked.

Delilah nodded, not even bothering to glance at Ballard. "We had a couple classes together. We were on different tracks. Ballard was always so smart."

He glared at her but she didn't even seem to notice.

His father laughed. "I wouldn't give him too much credit."

"Thanks, Dad."

Ballard's father ignored him. "I'd like to go for a walk," he said. It caught Ballard by surprise. As his father stood and headed for the cave door, Ballard stumbled over an argument to stop him.

“It’s dangerous,” he said.

“I’ve been to Little Rock,” his father said.

Ballard followed him to the door as his father creaked it open. He was torn but finally offered his father the handgun.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. Ballard forced it on the man, even though he’d have preferred to keep it for possible use on Delilah. “I’ll be back shortly.”

After he was gone, Ballard turned back to the kitchen, where Delilah was wiping the table.

“So you fucked me,” Ballard said.

“You wish.”

Ballard blushed. “You know what I mean. Why are you here?”

She shrugged. “Figured you had a good thing, and I wanted to be part of it.”

Ballard scoffed. “It’s our cave.”

“You just ate my food.”

“That you stole from me!”

She shrugged again. “Wasn’t hard to do.”

Ballard glared at her. “I trusted you. I saved you.”

“I brought it back,” she said. She still wasn’t looking at him. “And your Dad said I could stay.”

“I wouldn’t trust in him too much,” Ballard said.

“I don’t know; this place looks pretty nice.”

Ballard didn’t answer.

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They set up an unused area in the cave to be her room, grabbed her a mattress from an abandoned house nearby and hauled it back before dark, along with sheets and pillows for her. Ballard left her to get her room situated and went to check on his experiment. The finger had grown into about half an angel. It had a torso and legs, though no feet yet. It didn’t have a head, either. The limbs just ended in sealed stumps. Ballard cut into its chest and watched it grow outward, expanding to grow a new neck. He cut it again, and it grew part of a skull. He kept cutting it until its head grew. He did the same thing with the legs: cutting them to make it grow faster where he wanted it to. Then he wrote everything down. This one was dead, too. That didn’t make any sense, but there it was. He went back through his notes: the lungs and organs seemed fine, it was the brain that wasn’t right. He cut into this new one’s head. This time, he forced himself

to work through the smell. He cut the skull open wide enough to work with and scooped out all the dead brain. There was a little clump at the base that seemed healthy, so he left that in. As he watched, the healthy-seeming brain grew back but the dead brain part didn't. And when the whole thing grew back, it was still rotten.

"What are you doing?" Delilah said.

Ballard dropped the brains he'd just scooped out. She was standing in the doorway.

"Trying to figure them out," he said, picking the mess up and tossing it in a trashcan.

"You were always like that," she said with disdain in her voice. "Always doing extra work and stuff."

"They're dead. They won't hurt you."

"I know," she said, defensive. She hesitated but finally came in. He watched her while pretending to ignore her. She poked an angel and made a little face. "How'd you get them?"

"I looked for a big hole and then dragged them out."

She considered this. "Yeah but they're, like, not hurt."

He walked over to the older one and cut off its pinky finger with a pair of wire cutters.

"Ew!" she said. She didn't turn away, though. "It's got green blood!" She flinched from it.

"Keep an eye on the hand," he said.

He took the severed finger over to a bench and set it in a bowl and put on the heaviest rubber gloves he could find. He'd cut open a car battery earlier and dropped some things into the acid to test it, so he dropped the finger in and he watched it. He stepped back a bit and brushed against Delilah who watched eagerly.

"Battery acid?" she said.

"What happened to its hand?" He realized how didactic he sounded and tried to soften his tone.

"The finger grew back," she said. "So it healed after it fell? Are they alive?"

"No," he said "Maybe. But something's wrong with their brains."

The finger sizzled in the acid but remained whole.

"Wow," Delilah said. "It's not working."

"Give it time."

Ballard took a thin piece of iron and poked the digit down so it was submerged. The finger sizzled and started to look thinner around the edges. Slowly it dissolved, but the piece of metal was melting away also. The metal was mostly gone, and he dropped what was left into the acid. All that remained of the finger was a kind of puddle of flesh on the surface of the acid. As they watched, it dissolved and slowly disappeared.

Ballard nodded, satisfied.

"So you can kill them. But they're already dead, so what's the point?" Delilah asked.

"If they keep falling, we're going to be buried under them," Ballard said. "And what happens when one of them isn't dead?"

She shrugged. Even though he kept telling himself he was still annoyed at her, he was eager to share his findings. He cut open the newer angel's head and showed her its gloopy brain. She gagged at the smell and ran outside. When he was able to convince her to return, he showed her the rotten brain.

"It regenerates damaged," he said. "Which doesn't make any sense."

"None of it makes any sense."

"Just because we don't understand it. Something is outpacing their regenerative powers. Some kind of bacteria, maybe. I need a microscope." He took his smock off. "I'm going back to the school."

"Why?" she said. "So you can fix it?"

"Maybe," he said. "Or so I can understand it."

Her face reddened. "All the damage they do dead, you want to bring them back?"

Ballard tried another approach. "It's just a matter of time until one of them shows up alive, and we need to understand how to kill them. Battery acid isn't enough; it's a really difficult thing to use as a weapon. If I can figure out what's killing them, I might be able to figure out how to kill any survivors."

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She wouldn't let him leave until one of them told Ballard's father they were going. Somehow it had become "them" going. Ballard ran inside and called out to his father to tell him. He turned, after receiving no answer, and walked smack into Delilah.

"You sure are a lurker," he said in a sharp tone that immediately embarrassed him.

“Go and make sure he heard you.”

“Why?” he asked. “I leave all the time. He doesn’t care.”

“Maybe one time you won’t come back, and he’ll never know what happened or even where to look.”

There was something profoundly sad in her eyes that made the veracity of the statement shine painfully for Ballard. He turned on his heel and went and found his father sleeping.

“I’m going to the high school for some supplies,” he said.

It took three times before his father comprehended. “Thought you cleared it out already.”

“I need something else. I’ll be back soon. Go back to sleep.”

The snoring as he left the room told him his father had done so.

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They talked little on the drive. Delilah seemed content to stare out the window. Ballard refused to let himself feel enthusiasm or warmth toward someone he suspected was waiting for an opening in which to stick a knife. Ballard turned toward the gaping hole in the road when Delilah spoke up.

“There’s a back way, you know.”

Ballard pretended not to hear, so she repeated it. “Where?” he asked. She explained that he could cut through a field, which he grudgingly did, and soon they were at the school.

“Come on,” he said when she again showed no sign of exiting the truck.

“Nu-uh.” She shook her head.

“You came inside the cave.”

“That’s a cave. Underground.”

“So we’d be buried with no hope of digging ourselves out if a direct hit happened.”

“Caves are stronger than buildings,” she said, a hint of concern in her voice.

He shrugged and went inside through the back door after picking the lock again. He’d grabbed the sledgehammer which Delilah had graciously left, and he spent several joyous minutes launching the doorknobs from classroom doors before settling down and looking for a science room. There was a lab room with storage, and he looted the place, grabbing

Bunsen burners, flasks, chemicals, scalpels, and anything that might be useful in his experiments.

On his way out, hauling a microscope and duffle bag full of chemicals, he passed an open door. He paused, cursing the clinking of bottles in the bag, and slowly set everything down. He drew the gun and aimed at her head before he realized it was Delilah. She'd placed herself in one of the desks and was staring out the window. Ballard put the gun away and considered what to say.

"Mrs. Littlefield's class, right?" Ballard said.

"Jesus!" Delilah said, jumping in her seat. Ballard was secretly glad to pay her back for scaring him. "How long have you been standing there?"

"I never had her," he continued, ignoring her question, "but I know kids liked her."

"She was my favorite. She seemed like she really gave a shit, you know?"

Ballard didn't, but he nodded anyway. He'd never felt that any teacher particularly gave a shit, though he supposed they'd never had a reason to be concerned about him. Their whole purpose with him seemed to have been to get him out, not just out of the school, but out of the town, out of the state. Other students had been like ghosts to the teachers, but Ballard and the other Honors kids were the elect. The teachers pushed them in ways they didn't push the other kids, and when they talked about graduation, they talked about college and then leaving the state. Because that's what you did if you wanted to make a good living, the consensus seemed to be.

"Have you seen her?" He asked. "Since?"

She shook her head. "Haven't seen hardly anybody. Never thought about it. You?"

He shrugged. "Early on, I tried to find some folks. Most places I've seen are deserted."

"Everybody's dead," she said quietly.

"No." He shook his head. "I think they left. I don't think this is happening everywhere, just in the South. In the Bible Belt."

"How do you know that? There hasn't been any TV in months."

"CB radio."

She looked at him and blinked and then looked back out the window.

"I thought it was everywhere," she said.

“What happened to your family?” he asked.

She looked at him with sudden tears in her eyes. “What do you think happened? A fucking angel fell on them.”

“Where’d it happen?” Ballard asked, refusing to let it go even though her tone told him to.

“Fifty-Six Diner. They’d gone in to get supplies. They were talking about heading to the coast.”

“Coast is just as bad as here,” he said softly.

She ignored him and kept talking. “I went around back to look for toilet paper.” She laughed. “They had a supply closet back there for stuff like that. Paper goods.” She laughed again, though Ballard didn’t know why. It reminded him to raid the school for TP before they left.

“I heard it coming. You know, sometimes you can hear them coming and sometimes you can’t. It’s weird. But I didn’t realize what it was.” She laughed again, but Ballard realized it wasn’t a real laugh; it was something else. It was more of a laugh to keep from crying. “Finally, when it was just about on top of us, I saw it and ran inside to warn them. I didn’t even see them. This was all in the space of like a few seconds, you know?” Ballard nodded because she seemed to want him to. “I dragged myself out of the wreckage. The fucker had hit right on the kitchen, where they were. I was on the edge of it, but I still got knocked pretty bad.” She parted her hair and showed Ballard a scar. There was a pattern of scars down her neck he hadn’t noticed before because he hadn’t allowed himself to look that closely at her. He put his finger on them to feel the rough skin, but it was smooth. She didn’t flinch when he touched her.

He wanted to ask about the bodies, but he waited for her to tell him.

“I buried them the next morning. Took me all night to dig them out.”

There was more, so he waited. He wished there was a skylight in the room; it made him nervous to be inside so long without a way to see up.

“Had to use the winch on the jeep, and I must’ve made so much noise that somebody heard me. There I was, filling their graves in, and some fuckers came up and stole my car!” She laughed, and he joined her; he couldn’t help it. “I was like, ‘seriously?’ And they kept apologizing and everything, but they took it, sure as shit. Stole my toilet paper, too.” That set them both off again, a real laugh, this time, at what the world had become.

When it tapered off a couple minutes later, she got out of the chair, breezed past Ballard, and grabbed the duffle out in the hall.

“Um,” he said.

“I know; be careful with them. They’ll explode or something.”

What he’d actually been thinking was that she was going to walk away with the chemicals. But he realized, that moment, that she wouldn’t. They were in it together, now.

“Is there anything actually useful in here? Cause it’s heavy as shit.”

He let that go. “Take it out, carefully, and I’ll be right there.”

“Where are you going?”

“I forgot we needed toilet paper.”

That made them both laugh again.

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She’d propped the door open with a rock, and he could see out to the truck; her lean form resting against it. She was beautiful to him in that moment, the way that all women were beautiful simply because of their femininity, though hers tended to be hidden behind a gruffness that he supposed was meant to keep her safe. It made him sad in a way because he’d resigned himself to never having not just her but any woman; he’d resigned himself to dying out there, if not from a strike, then simply of loneliness or something he hadn’t even considered. He’d just been holding on until his Dad died.

But she smiled when she saw him, and he felt all of this shift—not drop away entirely, but shift downward. He had several big wheels of toilet paper in tow. He rolled them like bowling balls out to her and went back for more. He returned, saw her smile disappear as she looked up, her mouth gaping. A scream formed on her lips, and he started to run, still holding his toilet paper rolls as the scream from the sky eclipsed her voice. There was a rumble, and the building, or maybe it was the Earth, shuddered. He held the rolls up above his head instinctively as though they would shield him, and the ceiling came down around him.

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Ballard heard jazz drifting in and out of his dreams, the lyrics and tunes shaping images in abstract ways. He fought his way to consciousness through the weight of these intrusive thoughts and sat up, or rather tried, until a raw pain from his chest laid him back down. His head hurt, and he reached up and found that it was bandaged.

His back and legs were sore and he wondered how long he'd been in bed. He rolled over on his side but that sent an arc of pain through him that nearly knocked him unconscious. When the white flash passed, he slid over to his feet and stood slowly. He breathed heavily until his vision cleared while the music continued, upbeat and comforting.

Ballard clumped out into the kitchen-cave, which was the source of the music. He found a battery powered radio and turned it down, but not off. He pulled out a chair and sat at the table to catch his breath.

"Why'd you turn the music down?" Delilah said as she drifted in. She paused and put her hands on her hips to appraise him. "You look like shit."

"Thanks."

"No, it's good. You looked like dead shit before."

Ballard cocked his head to his side. "Okay." He was having trouble breathing. "I think I have a broken rib."

"Mmm hmm," Delilah said. "And you cracked your skull."

"You dug me out," Ballard said, suddenly remembering the school collapsing.

She recounted the story of seeing the angel fall but not being able to get to Ballard in time, and then after the building collapsed, how she'd used the truck and some chains to haul debris until she got to him.

"You have all these books on medicine and everything, so I read them and patched you up like they said. You weren't hurt too bad."

In his still stunned state, Ballard realized that was what he would've done.

"That's a lot of trouble to go to for someone you never liked in school."

"School's out," she said and smiled at him.

"You read my books, huh?" Ballard said.

She nodded, proud of herself.

"That must've been difficult. I mean, learning how to read and everything."

She adopted a put-upon look and smacked him in the arm. He groaned and doubled over, which hurt even more.

"Karma," she said. He couldn't even nod.

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When he was able to walk more easily, he continued his experiments out in the shed. He dissected the brain of one of the angels and tried to

discover what was killing it. He'd tried over and over to get it to grow back un-rotted, but he couldn't get past a certain point with it. The one interesting thing about it was the rotted brains didn't grow a new angel. He tried every experiment he could think of but wasn't learning much. They had plenty of supplies from the schools, so there wasn't much else to do. Delilah started playing on the CB while he worked, gathering information and making friends.

After about a week of this, Delilah interrupted Ballard's bubble.

"Let's compare notes," she said.

"Okay," Ballard said. Normally he'd be upset, but he'd gotten nowhere.

"You're right," she said. "The angels are only falling in the South. And most of the people have left. They've got refugee camps in Chicago, Detroit, DC. People are starving. They've started closing off the border, not letting people in."

"So we're better off here," he said.

She shrugged. "For now, I guess. How about you?"

He shook his head. "I've got nothing, really. I mean, it does seem to be some kind of organic compound that's attacking the angels' brains."

She considered this. "So, like a bacteria?"

"Yes." He nodded. "That's exactly it."

She looked at the angel, lying motionless. "So, like, could people catch it?"

Ballard shrugged. "I don't know, but it doesn't seem to be. I mean, we're not, you know, rotting from it."

"Do you know where it comes from?"

"No idea. But it's nasty. The brain cells try to regenerate, but it keeps killing them."

"That's scary as shit," Delilah said. She stared at the angel for a long moment. "So, up in heaven, there's some kind of bacteria or something killing angels. And then they fall to here and fuck us up."

"Astronauts have been all the way up to the moon and never found heaven," Ballard said. "Scientists couldn't figure out where the angels were coming from. They just appear in the sky and fall."

They were both silent for a few moments.

"The supplies from the schools won't last forever," Delilah finally said, wiping her hands on her pants. She went outside, forcing Ballard to follow her to continue the conversation.

“You said yourself people were starving in camps up north,” Ballard said. “You know how to farm, right? I’ve got books on it. We could plant crops.”

“I found your grow operation,” she said. “You don’t need me to teach you how to farm.”

He grinned. “So you want to go up north?”

She shrugged.

They locked eyes for a moment. “Who’s to say they’ll keep just falling over the South?” Ballard said. “Who’s to say it’ll keep happening forever? How many can there be?”

“So you want to ride it out?” She looked around as though evaluating the shed.

“Maybe. I don’t know what I want to do. But Dad isn’t leaving. And I don’t see a reason to.”

She shook her head. “They killed my family.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. She took it in hers. “They nearly killed both of us,” Ballard said. “But so what? They’re dead.”

She looked around. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe that’s the point. All my life, everybody pretended like they knew everything. Church, school, people acted like they had it all worked out. But they didn’t. They didn’t know a fucking thing. All I know, really, is that you saved me,” Ballard said, finally.

“You saved me, too,” she said back.

He realized that she was smiling at him. He took off his smock and washed his hands and then his face and dried it off. She was still smiling, so he walked over to her and looked her in the eye. She didn’t flinch, so he kissed her.

CL Bledsoe is the assistant editor for The Dead Mule and author of fourteen books, most recently the poetry collection Trashcans in Love and the flash fiction collection Ray's Sea World. He lives in northern Virginia with his daughter.

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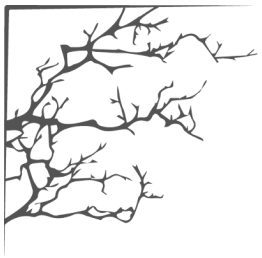

The Roommate
Edward Ahern

LET'S SIT AT THIS TABLE, Sam. I'll fetch our lunches in a bit. No, I can get them. I'm not totally crippled... not like Enid. I can move around. Okay, I do have an orderly wheel me out onto the porch so I can watch the sunset. Done it since I got here. Love how the sky tinges into dirty reds and greens and midnight blue as the day dies.

I was on the porch a couple months ago. A chill crept in with the dark, and a cat climbed onto the decking. It didn’t move or hiss, just sat looking at me. While night was birthing, it padded over in front of my chair.

It was a scarred-up Tom with shredded ears. His fur was patchy gray, like storm clouds breaking apart. I recognized the cat, but neither of us moved. Then, a half-second before the orderly opened the door to retrieve me, he sprang off the porch and into the shrubs.

The orderly, a Lebanese guy named Jamal, wheeled me back into our room. He stopped three feet from my bed. I’d yelled at him when he'd first tried to help me, so now he watches. I set down my cane, heaved up, and slid-stepped over to my bed.

Enid was reading. She always reads, hates television, says it wet-nurses stupidity. And she doesn't read English. She could, but she reads old books in German and Latin.

Jamal left, and Enid shut a leather bound book and looked at me. "So, Clara, what did you see out there?"

Sam, you know how we don't look like sisters. I swell and go heavy when I get older. Enid withers and puckers. Half of me is a whole of her. I turned my head toward her. "Okay sunset, but too cloudy. No green flash."

"What else?"

"You said to watch out for it. The cat jumped onto the porch, a scruffy grey thing. Just stared and left."

Enid thrust her hands against the mattress to hold her torso upright, then turned her head to face me. "He's back."

Enid set her book on the nightstand. Then, using her arms, she lifted her useless legs around one at a time until she's full face to me.. Her eyes were rheumy shiny. "About time he shows up. I can begin. Clara, I have a task for you."

"Will it hurt again?"

"Maybe not."

"Get Sam to do it. He visits in a couple days."

Enid's expression darkened. "Sam can't be involved in doing this."

"Why not? He's your husband. It's his marriage bondage."

"Don't test our sisterhood, Clara. Just do it."

So, listen, Sam, you know the chunks of life she and I spend together make me hate her more than any stranger. Enid's older by three years, older enough to torment me since I was a toddler. She's vicious hurtful if I didn't agree.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Bring me the cat."

"No Goddamn way! It'll scratch me, and probably has mange and fleas. Ticks too. Besides, Jamal would notice it and take it away from me."

"I'll attend to Jamal."

She already has, I thought. Enid gets people to do things, even things they hate. People like me. "The cat won't come near enough," I mutter.

"Oh, yes he will. You remember his name. Brundigeist. When he comes tomorrow, call his name three times softly and reach out both hands. After he jumps up, put him under your lap blanket. Don't let him nip you—his mouth festers."

"Get Jamal to do it."

"Brundigeist won't come to him. He will to you. You're blood of my blood."

"No, Enid, I won't."

Enid got that stare of hers, face muscles bunched, eyes flat, and began moving her hands as if knitting a mourning shawl. I felt burning hurt, like my finger and toe knuckles were cracking apart. I started to scream.

"Stop! Stop! All right, God Damn you, I'll do it."

The next evening, just as I'm close to being sun blind, the cat jumped onto the porch again. And even with my blue-hazed sight I could see him clearly, as if the darkness outlines him. I call out Brundigeist three times hoping he won't jump. But he does. I grab hold to put him under the

blanket and almost drop him. His bones feel wrong, like they're loose under his fur, kept close together only by his will. He tries to take a bite, but I grab him by the back of his neck.

Anyway, Sam, she hates you, you know. She blames you for getting crippled up, like you do something to her. Oh, she spreads it over with sticky sweetness, but there's bitter beneath. I wonder sometimes if things could be different. Never mind. Too old now.

I handed her the cat, and she didn't even pet it, just stuck it under her sheets. The cat settled between her thighs, and all I see until I go to sleep is the sheets moving slowly, like some kind of bestiality. I warned her about pests and scabies, but she didn't care.

The next morning Jamal smuggled in a Sterno can, stand, and sauce pot. Enid had me hobbling around gathering up the stuff I've collected for her before. Snippings of your hair, Sam, and a toenail that she brought from your home, brains from the centerpiece at a pig roast, rat's blood all crusty and fermented, plants with no name in English. She petted the cat as she boiled and stirred on her nightstand. The cat didn't purr, just growled wetly, like its lung was pierced. Enid was whispering things in her other voice. Words I didn't know.

By late afternoon she was done. The room reeked of rotten meat. She'd distilled everything down to red aspic that she put in a vial. Says it's for what ails you. You, Sam. Then she gave me orders, like she does.

Before I fetch the lunches, Sam, let me ask you: you never wonder if it's me and not Enid? She owns you now, but maybe it was different once, maybe it's us two. I think she still hates you, Sam, thinks you hexed her into being useless legged. Tell me what you think.

Oh. I see. You abide by her, so there never is a you and me. No, no, I understand. And you knew she was potioning you into getting healthy? I see. That's your decision, so I won't bring it up again. Let me go fetch our lunches.

Here you are Sam, dig in. Yes, I did what Enid said. There's a potion in your meal. Expect it tastes better than the usual cafeteria food. Personal ingredients. Jamal watched me to make sure I'd put it in. Nice tasty bits in it.

It does taste odd, but good. Glad to see you have an appetite.

You know, I had to wait nine years for this to happen again. Yes, I said again. I'm the one who crippled Enid. No, don't act like that. It's too late

to stop eating, you may as well finish it up.

I helped Enid and her infested cat make a batch 15 years ago. I collected truly rank things so she could kill a neighbor. She gave me the batch, and I poisoned the woman. She died in four days with running pus sores. But I saved some of it.

Some while later I made sure that Enid ate what I'd saved. There wasn't enough left to kill her, but it crippled her nice. She couldn't heal herself because I trapped and shipped off the cat. And she didn't know what I'd added to the potion.

No! Don't try and stand, Sam, you'll fall down. The potion's quick. See. I told you. Help me get you back up into the chair. There. Anyway, once Enid was crippled, you had to move her here. And then I took sick and joined her. And you visit us once a week.

She blamed you for a while. She suspected me as well. But I answered all her questions. What she did while asking, it hurt so bad I blacked out twice and still have scars. But she decided I was blood loyal.

Then you started getting sick, and Enid decided to make a fix-you-upper. But I tinkered with it. I'm eating what's meant for you. Sort of. The hair and nails are not yours. They're mine. Gray hair and yellowed nail clippings look alike, don't they?

This doesn't help you, of course. But it helps me. Me who Enid refused to make better. Me who suffered through her abuse and pain. As for you, if you'd wanted us to be together I'd have left you as you were. But you wanted so much to be with Enid, that I decided you should be like Enid. You ate what was bad for Enid. And you. Too bad.

Sam, screaming at me doesn't help. No, Enid can't fix things. She doesn't have the cat anymore. This time I cut it up and burnt the pieces. Messy. The pieces keep moving around. So, no more potions for Enid. But you get to share the room with her. I've transferred already to another home. Never mind which one. And Sam. Do what she says when she moves her hands.

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had a hundred fifty stories and poems published so far. His collected fairy and folk tales, The Witch Made Me Do It was published by Gypsy Shadow Press. His novella The Witches' Bane was published by World Castle Publishing, and his collected fantasy and horror stories, Capricious Visions was published by Gnome on Pig Press.

Ed's currently working on a paranormal/thriller novel tentatively titled The Rule of Chaos. He works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of five review editors.

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Through the Gates of Hell
Stacy Overby

THE NAMELESS ONE GHOSTED through the graveyard. Ancient tombstones crowded around him like vultures circling death. They even seemed to lean toward him as if to lure him in sooner rather than later. Scattered among the graves stood a few barren trees. Spanish moss hung thick casting eerie shadows of skeletal fingers reaching for him.

Confirmation he was in the right place came when the presence triggered a shiver down his spine. It hung in the air as thick as the mist rising from the surface of the swamps. He needed to find that presence. The Priestess said it would be in a place like this. Somewhere out of the way. Forgotten. It didn't get much more forgotten than this.

The old monastery emerged from the shadows and mist like a gargoyle in the gloom about to launch. With no options left, the spirit he sensed had to be in there and his dawn deadline approached fast. The black shroud of night had just begun to lift. The last minutes before the dawn loomed with a menace even the old monastery couldn't match. The Nameless One made his way through the rusted and rotted ironbound doors of the monastery's inner gates. The constant dampness in the air ate at those doors until the beautiful scenes carved there became macabre mockeries. It was here. He was certain.

He tracked the spiritual presence into the church at the center of the monastery grounds. The invisible eyes of long dead monks seemed to follow him through the slime coated wooden doors. As he made his way past the first altar into the nave, he swore the spirit laughed at him, though he heard no sound. The rows of mushrooms and lichen growing in the decrepit sagging pews reminded him of parishioners waiting for the priest. He paused, listening to rats scurrying in the darkness, and tried to decide where the spirit hid.

His sixth sense flared, courtesy of The Priestess. Without a doubt, The Nameless One could tell the spirit waited in the scriptorium. Progress was

made through the detritus time left on the nave floor; he approached the scriptorium and pulled several items out of pockets. He wrapped the cheap, blue, plastic bracelet around one wrist and pulled the necklace over his head. The rose pendant caught the dim rays of moonlight shining through the broken windows.

The Nameless One dropped his hands to his sides and took a deep breath. The spirit chose that moment to burst out of the room. It wrapped itself around him, dissolving into him before he had a chance to react. His body went rigid, eyes fluttering beneath bluish purple lids. His hand moved to touch the bracelet, fighting invisible restraints for every inch. Sweat beaded on his forehead as purple fingermarks blossomed on his forearms. Finally, he brushed his fingertips against the bracelet. Bite marks tore open one hand and arm and blood splashed at his feet.

Movement got easier with that touch. The Nameless One fought to reach the necklace. The sweat ran down his haggard face. He closed one hand around the necklace in a white knuckled grip, the tiny golden leaves biting into his palm. Claw marks slashed across his chest and down one side of his face. Blood sprayed the nearby pews.

The strain drew his face into a death's head mask. With the last drop of effort, The Nameless One pressed his other hand to his shirt pocket. An inhuman scream flew from his lips. Blood erupted from his mouth. As he lost consciousness, he noticed blood dripping from the altar. It seemed somehow fitting he ended up offering a blood sacrifice even though it wasn't a part of the religious ceremonies the church had once seen. Then the void reached out and swallowed him whole.

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The Nameless One woke to the sensation of small, clawed feet scrabbling for purchase on him. Darkness garbed the nave in velvety shadows. He sat up shaking the creature free from him, not wanting to learn any more. He'd been there for most of a day at least. The growing darkness told him that. The Nameless One hoped it had not been longer than just the day. The Priestess waited, and he needed to make that deadline. He winced at the ache in his body and made his way to his feet to stagger out into the last remnants of light.

The Nameless One grimaced at the new scars on his arm and chest. He was thankful the marks on his face hadn't scarred. That gift came from The Priestess when she gave The Nameless One his powers. That way he

would be less memorable to any living souls he encountered in his one-man war. Then again, so many scars already crisscrossing his body a few more weren't noticeable.

He pulled a small, worn photo from his shirt pocket. "You saved me again."

The Nameless One scrubbed his face and shook his head as he returned the photo to his pocket along with the necklace and bracelet. As his body creaked and tensed, he made his way back to his car.

Maybe this time he had done enough to redeem his name and The Priestess would set him free.

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"You know the deal, Nameless One. Fight the demons until your selflessness outweighs the harm you did. Only then will you regain your name." Her whispered words were a knife in his heart.

Even though The Nameless One told himself he'd long since given up hoping to be free from the foolish deal he'd made, something happened this time. Or nothing. Either way, he had allowed himself to hope, just a little, that this time might be different. That the scars spider-webbing his body and the nightmares clouding his mind would come to an end.

"What more must I do to redeem myself?" His whole body deflated as the endless battle to hold onto any hope pushed toward a final conclusion. His instincts told him he would not survive much more of this war, but The Priestess didn't seem to care.

She'll probably go out and find some other stupid asshole like me to recruit the minute I'm dead without even shedding a tear for me. He wisely kept that thought to himself.

"You must bring this one through the very Gates of Hell."

He blinked. "What? I've never had to do that before. Why now?"

"This one is different. I cannot bind this one. It must be taken back through the Gates before being released. If it is released anywhere but beyond the Gates of Hell, it will escape and hunt again."

Images of its victims poured into his head. Had it not been for the things he'd seen hunting other spirits for The Priestess, the actions of this one would have made him sick. As it was, nausea wormed its way through his stomach from the atrocity with which this one treated its victims. Part of him was shocked this one's victims didn't make the news while the other part of him accepted it as normal. These demons had adapted so well

most people were unaware of their existence, much less what they were capable of doing. He'd seen what they did all too often. The Nameless One understood people like him and The Priestess were necessary to keep the rest of the world safe. But he was tired, more tired than he could detect in a long time.

"Will I be free once I do this?"

Her stare bore into him, reminiscent of the imaginary eyes of dead monks at the monastery. The silence lingered like the mold spores in the church.

"If you succeed."

"And my name?"

A soft chuckle bounced around the room. "Yes, my Nameless One, you will have redeemed your name should you complete this task."

His heart leapt at the chance she gave him. A slim one, granted, but a chance nonetheless.

"What must I do?"

"Drink this." She handed him a small glass vial containing a thick black substance. "You will see what to do."

The Nameless One hesitated. She hadn't given him much to go on. The battered and abused part of his soul screamed at him to run, to get away from her, that she tricked him. But his heart wouldn't let go of that sliver of hope she offered.

His hand shot out and poured the tarry liquid down his throat before his soul could react.

A sticky, grasping darkness enveloped him and he heard The Priestess say, "Good luck. No one has succeeded yet."

As the blackness swallowed him whole, he kicked himself.

Stupid! I should have asked about that! When will I learn?

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The Nameless One woke lying in a dusty field, sat up, and coughed dirt out of his lungs. The ground, beyond parched, threw up puffs of dust at the slightest movement. He doubted the dust had ever seen enough water to knock it down. Crazed cracks gaped the landscape as far as he could see. Nothing else broke up the barren landscape. No buildings. No gates. Nothing. Just flat, desiccated emptiness.

Sure, I'll know what to do when I get here. Nice directions. A little less ambiguity would have been helpful.

He levered himself up, sighed, and picked a random direction. The Nameless One figured there had to be something, somewhere, that would help in figuring out how to get rid of the spirit he carried. What felt like hours later, he stopped, unsure of the time. His watch quit working at some point along the way, maybe the moment he got to wherever here was. Nothing new broke up the empty landscape enough to be certain he had not walked in circles.

The Nameless One thrust his hands in his pockets and kicked at the ground and, to his surprise, a chunk of rock broke free and skittered across the baked earth. Movement through cracks at the bottom of the hole caught his attention as he pulled out the loose stone. Then he tried to kick at the hole, to loosen up more pieces of hardened earth. Nothing budged. He knelt and tried to pry pieces out of the ground. The jagged rock tore into his fingers; the hungry earth soaked up the ribbons of blood with eager mouths not wasting one drop. That this was a difference in the monotony of the barren landscape was all that registered. The ground's refusal to give further ignited his temper.

He roared as he picked up the piece of rock and threw it at the hole. A piece broke away from the edge. The Nameless One dug that piece out and threw the rock again. More of the edges surrounding the hole flew apart. The cracks at the bottom of the hole grew larger. Glimmers of light tantalized him. Hints of movement beckoned. He still had no idea what he was seeing, but he was certain the hole held the answer.

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The last thing The Nameless One remembered was breaking through the hole to see what lurked beyond the cracks. He got a glimpse of fire before losing consciousness, and it made him cringe inside because too many of the scars decorating his body came from flames. The Nameless One had vowed nothing would hold him captive or torture him. That he would die before allowing it again.

Yet here he hung, feet just touching the floor enough to half-way support him, bound and imprisoned with an even worse dilemma. Demons here wanted him to release the spirit to them, but not knowing if he had passed the Gates of Hell, he refused to give it up just yet. Something told him the Gates of Hell was a specific place, not just getting to Hell. The Nameless One had told himself he would never betray his word again after

having done that too many times. To do it again was out of the question, but if he didn't give up the spirit, they would keep him. Forever.

His one chance of having his life back was slipping away. Now he understood what The Priestess meant when she said the others failed. Did the others give up the spirits they carried or did they refuse? Were they stuck somewhere in Hell, waiting and regretting their decision to attempt the insane task given by The Priestess?

The only upside to the situation was that he got away from the deserted dust bowl. Not that this was better, but at least the scenery had changed.

Focus! The Nameless One needed to figure out how to get out of this. There had to be a way out, he just needed to find it. He strained at the chains around his arms and legs again. They continued to tighten to the point he lost circulation.

He slumped, dangling like a broken puppet in a demented version of Dante's Inferno, half-standing and half-hanging. It was futile. The chains wouldn't give. The Nameless One had run out of ideas. In his desperation to be free, to have his identity back, he'd thought himself capable of doing what the others had not, and found he had been wrong.

"Hey," a soft whisper came from the flickering shadows.

The Nameless One's heart thumped a wild drumbeat in his chest. Someone was talking to him without wanting the spirit.

"What?" he tried to whisper. It came out a croak.

"You is one of Them, isn't you? Them who bring the others back here."

He hesitated, unsure of what the little demon meant by *Them.*

"Who are you?" He continued to work on an answer to the question.

"Nybbas. You *is* one of Them. Nameless."

He nodded, seeing no way around it.

"You have a way back?"

Again, he paused. The Nameless One didn't have a way to get back. In her usual style, The Priestess hadn't covered that, but Nybbas didn't need to know. Could he manipulate Nybbas into helping him? He had no choice but to try.

"You do! You help Nybbas find way out."

"Why? I recognize your name. We're in Hell, aren't we?"

"Yes. You heard of Nybbas?"

"I've read you're one of the named denizens in Hell." He didn't add that Nybbas appeared in the demon mythology as a fool.

“You *know* Nybbas! Must help Nybbas. Nybbas not want to be in this place no more.”

That caught him by surprise. Why would a demon not want to live in Hell? Granted, the rest of the demons may not be kind to Nybbas seeing as the demon seemed to fit the image painted of him being an idiot, but Nybbas belonged here. The Nameless One understood the others left, not because they didn’t want to live here, but because they wanted more victims than they got through the natural course of time. But, a demon that didn’t want to be in Hell and didn’t appear to be looking for victims; a demon who asked for help?

“Look, you help me and I’ll see what I can do. The only way I have to get back allows only one to pass, but there has to be a way around it.”

“You trying to trick Nybbas. You lying. Nameless Ones never nice.”

“No, no, no, I’m not. I will try to help you get out of here.”

A short, twisted figure crept from the pulsing shadows revealing mottled reddish skin, small dark horns, and a rictus grin with jagged teeth peeking out from cracked, bloody lips. *No wonder nothing beyond the Gates of Hell took Nybbas serious looking like that.*

“You close eyes.”

“Why?”

“Must see to be free.”

“What? Shouldn’t I keep my eyes open then?”

The little demon growled, reached into a pocket hidden in the rags wrapped around his waist and threw something into The Nameless One’s face. His eyes burned and he couldn’t help but fight to get a fist to his eyes to soothe the fire there. The chains cut off the circulation in his hands as tears streamed down his face. His eyes fluttered like a leaf on the wind trying to ease the maddening irritation.

“Close eyes. Leave closed. Helps.”

The Nameless One closed his eyes and took a deep breath, giving into what Nybbas forced. He struggled to relax when his hands screamed for blood flow, however his years of fighting for The Priestess taught him to block physical pain from his mind. It took more effort than it should have, but he reached the trance-like state he used in his battles to ignore the stinging itch in his eyes.

Then the images danced across his vision in a bizarre cinematic film festival. His past, the one before The Priestess entered his life. The

Priestess finding him, broken and lost, and her offer of hope, with the caveat of giving up his identity, that he had been too naïve to turn down. The slow crushing realization he would never find the peace she promised, yet fighting the battles anyways because he had nothing else left, not even his name. Each of the scars throbbed anew as the battles where he earned them replayed themselves in his mind.

The flashbacks stopped for a moment before a riot of sensory stimulation overwhelmed him. When The Nameless One thought he would go even madder than possible, it stopped.

The visions stabbed through the heart when they returned. This time his wife and daughter appeared. Tears slipped down his cheeks leaving cool tracks as they crept toward the floor. Then he realized it wasn't the past again; this time they were older than that last time he saw them. And happier. The Nameless One tried to reach for them only to have the chains stop him as they smiled and gestured to him, asking him to join them, welcoming him.

The Nameless One collapsed, surrendering all his weight to the chains uncaring that they would tighten to the point of destroying his limbs. The vision, and he had to work to remember it was just a vision, cut deeper than anything else ever had. It was everything he wanted, needed, and it wasn't real.

"But can be, Nameless One."

He opened his eyes to meet the glimmering burnt orange eyes of the demon before him.

"How?"

"Nybbas commands visions. Dreams. Things that may yet be."

"How do I get them back?"

"Nybbas knows where they are."

"Take me to them."

"Swear to take Nybbas with when Nameless One leaves."

He took a deep breath at the demand for another oath. If he swore, he wouldn't be able to break it, not without screwing everything up he'd worked so hard to accomplish.

"I swear I will do everything I can to take you out of Hell."

He hoped the little demon would accept his oath as it left him some room to maneuver without having to set it loose on Earth. The Nameless One prayed the risk he took wasn't too great, and that it would pay off.

The demon studied him for several tense minutes, hints of shrewdness peeking out of those rust colored eyes. Just when he was about to give in, Nybbas nodded.

“Is good. Wait. Will come when time is right.”

With that Nybbas disappeared like water on the wrong side of the Gates of Hell.

He slumped against the chains again, but this time he noticed the chains didn’t tighten like they had before. They hadn’t since Nybbas threw the powder in his face.

Nybbas must have some power here after all.

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The Nameless One had no way to mark the passage time in the flickering shadows. With his mind wandering to how he might get out and the vision Nybbas showed coming true, he waited for the demon to return. For the first time in this life, he let himself imagine what it would be like to have it all back, and struggled to remember they were visions. Dreams a devil danced before him to bribe him into freeing it.

He forced his mind away from all of that because they would not happen for real. Even if he survived this ordeal, he still had to return to The Priestess. She might not hold up her end of their bargain, or give him back the life she had promised. The Nameless One didn’t know how long he’d drifted, but it came to an abrupt end when several demons appeared without a sound.

“Give us the spirit.”

“I can’t.”

“We will not ask again.”

“It doesn’t change my answer any.”

A cat-o'-nine-tails, a Qilinbian, and a scourge appeared in their hands. They circled around him and set about torturing him. Each of the cat’s nine tails ended in shards of glass that bit deep into his legs. The Qilinbian’s single long tail of metal links left bloody trails across his back as the scourge raised dark purple welts that oozed blood down his chest. The Nameless One screamed out his rage and agony despite his best effort not to give them that satisfaction as they punished him.

Seconds turned into hours as the whips rose and fell. Blood coated his body in a sticky crimson robe, pooling at his feet. The spirit he held must have sensed how close it was to freedom and struggled to break free of the

bondage in which he held it. Soon the internal battle rivaled the torture for the pain it caused. Only the stubbornness of The Nameless One's heart holding on to the last tattered remnants of hope kept him from releasing the spirit and begging the demons for death.

After an eternity, they stopped.

"This will continue until you release the spirit for death will not come to you in this place."

With that they disappeared as quick and silent as they appeared. The pain burned through every nerve cell in his body. His skin had been so worked over not one inch remained untouched, yet relief in the oblivion of unconsciousness eluded him. To stand drew strident protests from every muscle, yet slumping against the chains ratcheted the protests to a deafening level. So much so The Nameless One questioned his resolve to hold onto the spirit, to keep his word.

The Nameless One shifted around trying to find any lessening of the pain that overrode everything else in his body. The pulsating throbs helped him mark the passage of time. So many things drifted in and out of his mind as he tried to ease the pain.

The Nameless One had no notion of how long he'd been there trying to convince himself to keep his word despite what the demons did when they returned. Their various whips were with them again. Without a word, they started in on him. Welts crossed open wounds as lacerations split open bruised flesh like the skin bursting on rotten fruit. None of the demons spoke as they beat him bloodier than before.

As sudden and silent as they appeared, they left. This time supporting his own weight became impossible despite the pain the chains caused. At least the chains remained static. The Nameless One was unaware if the demons failed to notice or if they didn't care. Either way, that simple fact became his one spot of relief in a sea of anguish.

It happened a third time. The only sounds were the metallic rattle of the Qilinbian, the snap-thud of the whips hitting his flesh, and the ever hoarser screams torn from him.

"Nameless One. Wake up. Is time."

He fought his eyes open to find Nybbas creeping out of the shadows. He slumped down again letting his eyes crash shut.

"It doesn't matter now, Nybbas, I'm dead. It's a matter of time."

"No. Time now. You gave word."

“How can I? I’m broken. I can’t even hold myself up much less rescue you, too.”

Nybbas kicked him in the shin. “You weak. You not like Them, giving in. You Nameless One. *Now* is time.”

“Time for what?” He gritted his teeth to keep from shouting, which would aggravate his ruined throat beyond its current ravaged state.

“Test. All Them come here must be tested.”

He tried to arch an eyebrow but, it still hurt too much, so he gave up.

“Like this? I’ve bled out worse than a hog at butcher time and I can’t hold myself up. For God’s sake, I can’t even think straight from the pain and you want me to do a test?”

“Must do test. Or you stay here. Wait for end you say comes.”

The Nameless One opened his mouth, blinked, and shut it again without a sound. Nybbas had a point. If the little demon could get him out of here, he’d at least not die by torture at the hands of several demons. Demons he’d spent the last five years chasing and returning to Hell. The Nameless One couldn’t figure how the others had gone out, but he didn’t want to die like this.

“Fine, I’ll take your damn test, but don’t be too surprised when I fail it.”

“Is not way to take test. Nybbas need you finish test. You need you finish test.”

If The Nameless One had been able to scrub his face, he would have in that moment. “Whatever. Get me out of here before the others come back.”

“Close eyes.”

“Why?”

“Do. Need to see. Watching not good. No see no more if watch.”

He did simply because he didn’t have the strength to argue. An intense heat and a wet ripping sound inundated him as temptation prodded at him to open his eyes despite what Nybbas said. How would seeing something make him blind?

Then again, consider where you are.

A wet, sticky thing inched down his arm leaving a trail of slime behind that itched a little. How The Nameless One noticed that amongst the myriad other more painful sensations was beyond him. Then it travelled along his leg in a similar intimate caress. Another groped down his back as a third slug-like thing worked its way across his chest. The Nameless One

quit trying to keep track of the repelling appendages when he felt the fourth one on his ankle.

After what became a rather uncomfortable freak session with something that conjured images of a deformed and demented octopus crossed with a slug, the thing went away. He hung there from the chains in silence for a moment before they disappeared. Unprepared for the lack of support, The Nameless One collapsed.

“Open eyes. Is done. Time to go.”

He did as instructed and saw Nybbas stood in the same spot with no sign of what had been creeping over his body.

“Stand. Come. Is time.”

The Nameless One was about to point out how he could not hold himself up without the support of the chains when he realized something had changed. He still hurt beyond any rational comprehension, but he could stand.

“Come. No let go no matter what.”

Nybbas held out one small, deformed hand. He took the proffered hand, utterly lost and unsure of himself. In fact, he hadn’t been this confused since the day everything fell apart. The day he made the bargain with The Priestess.

A moment later, the room blackened as if all the flames there were extinguished without warning before vertigo set in. When he thought he would lose any remnants left in his stomach, it stopped with a jarring abruptness.

“Here.”

“And where is here?”

“Test. Must go. Cannot help. You must pass test.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You trapped here forever.”

“Great. I guess dying in Hell is a fitting end.”

“No. Not die. No leave. Not still in body.”

“What does that mean?”

“What you think you hunt in your world? Where you think spirits from?”

He blinked several times and his jaw moved in silence. He’d always assumed the spirits he hunted were demons and devil spirits. But it made

so much sense with the vicious way they fought and how they understood so much about his tactics.

“They’re the previous Nameless Ones who failed.”

He swallowed a couple times and tried again after working a little moisture back into it.

“So. How do I pass this test?”

Nybbas shook his head and heaved a sigh, reminding him of a parent with an exasperating child, and he had become the child.

“Nybbas no knows how pass. Just test is here and must pass so survive.”

This demon puzzled him. Nybbas seemed so genuine in his willingness to help, yet he was a demon. A bad guy. It seemed convenient how much information Nybbas had at certain times and how little he had when it mattered. But he had tied himself to the little creature now.

Just like before, Nybbas disappeared. The Nameless One sighed, let himself drop to the ground, and realized his mistake as arrows of pain shot through his body stealing his breath. He rearranged himself to ease the throbbing a little. As he looked around, he realized no doors existed in this place, no way in or out.

What the Hell? The Nameless One chuckled at the inadvertent pun and his observation. Why should little details like rooms with no doors surprise him at this point? Other than that little anomalous detail, the room appeared quite ordinary–for a cavern-like structure in Hell. The Nameless One bore a sensation of respite, which might have been because of the lack of flames, unlike his last location.

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Somewhere in there, The Nameless One must have fallen asleep for a while because when he looked around again food and water waited for him. The Nameless One knew he should be careful, but he couldn’t remember how long it had been since he last ate or drank. Caution thrown aside, The Nameless One laid into the food like a prisoner of war survivor.

Really, that’s what I am. I hope I find a better end than a lot of prisoners of war.

When he finished eating, he got up to explore further. A few steps into The Nameless One’s investigation, he realized he didn’t hurt as bad. The mystery of where he was soon forgotten, The Nameless One ran his hands over his battered body. It still hurt, but most of the open wounds had

closed, and the welts looked weeks old. He was certain he hadn't been in this room for that long.

The Nameless One took a deep breath and continued his search. As he first believed, there was nothing else there. Literally. Even the dishes disappeared at some point in his exploration.

Not knowing what else to do, The Nameless One laid down to take a nap. He heard a whisper as he drifted off, or maybe he imagined it.

"So begins the first test. Face your longings."

He struggled to wake for a moment before being sucked into a dizzying darkness that swallowed him whole.

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"Honey, is something wrong?"

The Nameless One turned to find his wife standing behind him and felt like someone had sucker punched him. Hard.

"No, love, nothing's wrong."

A conversation with another human being seemed foreign given that he did not remember how long it had been since he'd talked to anyone but The Priestess. The Nameless One's wife being the first person to break that record was a special kind of cruel.

"Daddy?"

That sweet little voice was a knife through his heart. The Nameless One didn't want to turn, didn't want to see her. But he had no choice, though, he had to look because he would do anything for her.

"What, sweetie?"

"Cookie?" The hard sounds came out more like T's with her high, clear, two-year-old voice.

"Yes, honey, you can have a cookie." The Nameless One's wife handed the little blond girl a cookie.

He pulled her little body close to him in a tight embrace, her silky curls tickling his face as he inhaled the fresh scent of baby soap and baby.

"Daddy!" She giggled as she tried to squirm away, dribbling a trail of cookie crumbs down his arm.

The Nameless One sighed and let her go, reluctance filling every fiber of his being. She smiled up at him with cookie crumbs stuck to her chin and lip. No sweeter scene ever existed to The Nameless One - his wife and daughter together in the sunlit kitchen of the home he used to share with them.

The first tremors came as the ground rumbled a little. His daughter's eyes widened as she froze at first, then laughed without understanding the danger that he knew followed.

The Nameless One tried to pull them from the room. "Come on! We need to get out of here!"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's only a little earthquake. Besides, it's almost bath time."

His wife picked up their daughter and brushed the crumbs from her face as he tried again to escort her out the back door.

"You don't understand, you're not safe."

She disengaged herself from him. "Honey! What is the matter? You're never like this."

"I'm trying to keep you guys safe!" The Nameless One didn't mean to shout, but he knew what was coming, one of the biggest earthquakes in over a century. He didn't care anymore how he got back to that point in time or how he remembered what he did. The Nameless One did not have it in him to let them down again, let them die again. He would do anything in his power to stop that from happening once more.

"Please come with me."

"You're overreacting."

She took their daughter and left the room. He stood there, his heart shattering a fraction of an inch at a time, shook his head, and stalked after them. Soon he caught up to his wife and stepped in front of her.

"We're not safe in here. We should leave. Now."

"You're being ridiculous. It's the baby's bedtime."

Then the big one hit. The floor rocked and the walls swayed as the ground heaved. Anything hanging on the wall went airborne and dishes in the kitchen hurtled to the floor, disintegrating. The Nameless One heard a groan that struck him numb for a moment before the ceiling came down, including the roof. He tried to get to his wife and daughter as debris fell thicker than rain covering his body in cuts and bruises faster than he could blink.

"NO!"

The Nameless One saw one of the central beams swinging with the earthquake's momentum. There was no time but he still fought, knowing he was too late. It crushed his family before everything cut to black.

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He drifted in the darkness with the memory of the beam hitting them all replaying in his mind. That memory conjured pain no physical injury would ever match. The Nameless One let go, floating further into the void to escape the eviscerating agony.

The darkness faded away so gradually that he did not realize the light intruded on his peace. When he did, he tried to hide in the darkness, but found himself pushed out of the peaceful emptiness.

“Face your fears,” the same soft voice whispered, sending shivers down his skin, just loud enough to convince The Nameless One he had not imagined it the first time.

The Nameless One groaned when enough detail emerged from the shadows to recognized where he was — in Hell. Only it differed from where he last remembered being. There were people here though they didn’t seem to be alive. In fact, some of them were quite dead, their fatal wounds proof of that, yet The Nameless One also sensed at least one living being amongst the deceased.

He scanned the faces as they shuffled and shambled by. The sensation of a supposed sucker punch was nothing compared to the attack on his senses at what he found. Blond curls hip high holding onto a woman he would recognize anywhere.

The Nameless One fought through the rest of the crowd to reach them but the bodies pressed in around him. Blood smeared his body as he forced his way past mangled walking corpses, their hands clutching at him.

“Damn it! Let go!”

He took his frustration out on the bodies in his way, swinging at the shambling figures hoping to knock them out of his way. It coated him with blood and other less desirable things.

It didn’t seem to matter how much he fought to get to his family, though, they were just out of reach. Close enough to glimpse, but not touch. He tried to shout to them, but they didn’t respond. When he slowed and stopped, the press of dead flesh ceased. As he stood in place and yelled again, they turned. He expected to find evidence of their deaths, but saw none.

“Why did you leave us?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Daddy bye-bye.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I know I promised you and I tried. I really did.”

“That doesn’t matter to her now, does it? You weren’t there. Again.”

“Please, tell me how to fix this. Tell me how to make this up to you both. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?”

The Nameless One needed his family. They were all that mattered.

“Anything.”

The silence stretched for an eternity. Not even the flames that danced up out of the ground made a sound.

“Leave us alone.”

He dropped to the ground in a boneless heap. Those three words broke him in a way nothing else ever had the power to do.

“Why?”

“Why should we want you around? You weren’t there when we needed you and you didn’t keep your promise. Again. I won’t put my daughter through that anymore. She’s been through enough already.”

The Nameless One winced at her sole claim to their daughter. The venom in her voice drove the knife in deeper.

“But I love you both.”

“We don’t anymore.”

She turned and walked away, their daughter clinging to her hand. He watched them go, silent tears streaming down his cheeks making a rusty mess. The Nameless One scrubbed his face and ran his hands through his hair. He punched the ground and hung his head, tears dropping into the dirt.

“No more. I’m done. I can’t do this anymore.”

He curled up, wishing for death, nothingness. Heaven and Hell could burn for all he cared. The peaceful emptiness of oblivion called to him, promising to ease the agony searing every fiber of his being.

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The darkness overtook him. Once again The Nameless One floated in the void, numbed into almost complete nothingness. No more pain from his wife and daughter’s deaths, from their blame and rejection.

The Nameless One didn’t know how long he’d drifted before he sensed hands shaking him.

“Time to wake. Must not stay here longer.”

He struggled to pull away, to ignore the voice in the darkness.

“No. Will not allow you death. Won’t die here. Said that already. You gave word.”

That gave him pause. What had he promised and to whom? Then it all came back. All of it. Reluctance to leave the comforting numbness filled The Nameless One, but he’d given his word. Since his wife and daughter’s deaths, he never broke it.

The Nameless One lifted heavy eyelids to find the room glowing like embers. More shadows than light filled the gloom to where he just made out the little demon waiting across from him.

“Come. Must leave. Test done.”

“What the hell was the point of those tests?”

“Not certain. Not know what you saw. What you given chance to change.”

“What? A chance to change something? I didn’t have a chance to change anything.”

The demon didn’t answer. The Nameless One replayed the scenes in his mind, every detail of that earthquake burned into his memory, and the scene from elsewhere in Hell still fresh in his eyes.

“See. Chance to change. You not take.”

He realized Nybbas was right; he could have forced his wife and daughter to listen to him, forced them to accept him. But The Nameless One understood that had never been an option because to do so would have taken from them what he loved most. Their free spirits.

“I had no choice, Nybbas. I couldn’t have done that, not and live with myself afterward.”

“Come. Time to go. Now must take Nybbas with you.”

Nybbas touched his shoulder, and they flickered from the room. The sensation of sliding right through the shadows that undulated throughout Hell rippled along his skin before they stopped in a room he recognized from the second vision. This time it did not hold the animated corpses from his vision, but it wasn’t empty. Odd cage like structures packed so close together they left almost no space for the narrow path weaving through the room

“What now?”

“Return spirit beyond Gates of Hell. Cannot leave with it.”

The Nameless One had completely forgotten about the spirit he carried. That pain had been so minimal compared to what he'd been through, it blended into the background. He made his way into the room.

"I suppose I have to lock this thing up, don't I?"

"Want spirit of corrupted Nameless One destroy you?"

"Yeah. Didn't think I'd get off that easy."

As The Nameless One scanned the cages, he found an empty one on the far side. The path twisted through the cages to the point he thought it passed every one despite looking like a straight line to the empty one.

"Who designed this place, M. C. Escher?"

"Not recognize name. This is Place of Confinement. Only exists beyond Gates of Hell. Not allowed freedom of Hell here."

"What are the Gates of Hell anyway?"

"Place unwanted demons go. Not in Hell. Worse."

"Damn. Who decides who gets locked up here?"

"Demon Generals cannot command you, you sent here."

"Harsh."

"Is Hell. Beyond Hell."

"Good point."

They stood in silence, staring at the path before them. A strange reluctance to lock the spirit away consumed The Nameless One though he had been sent here to do this very thing. Now that he thought about it again, the malevolence emanating from the trapped spirit seemed palpable. Only The Nameless One's faith separated it from freedom and he noticed his strength draining faster than he liked.

"Is time. Must go. Finish task."

"Yeah, but there's something about the room, though."

"Is warding. Keep demons out."

"Why do that? It's Hell. Don't demons get the run of the place?

Nybbas shook his head.

"No. That movies. Lies. These uncontrollable. Even Demon Generals no want these spirits. Some want set free for power. Must keep out."

Now he knew he was fatigued. He should have been able to figure that out from Nybbas's earlier comments about these spirits being pure anarchy. The Nameless One took a deep breath and forced himself to take a step into the room. The dread thickened. He stepped again. The tension

choked the air. A third step seemed unbearable, but he made himself take it, anyway.

The cacophony overwhelmed him for a few moments. Anger. Hurt. Fear. Sadness. Loathing. Frustration. Every uncomfortable, negative emotion in existence assailed him. Screams, moans, shouts, and whispers pummeled his ears to the point the cacophony drowned out any words that may have been there. Cages that seemed benign before he entered were dirty, damaged, and reeked. A thick miasma filled his mouth and nose, choking him with the cloying stench.

The only plus was that the resistance from crossing the barrier had disappeared. The Nameless One continued down the path and tried to ignore the technicolor splashes of blood and other less savory things painted across the clear fronts.

It didn't take long before The Nameless One realized he would have a much harder time completing this chore than he thought. Every step closer to that cage made the spirit fight harder. It was a matter of time before the energy it took to keep the spirit contained would far outweigh the energy to get to the cage. All the while, Nybbas's eyes bore into his back. He wasn't sure what would happen if he failed, but he understood Nybbas wouldn't let him get off easily.

The Nameless One scanned the trail ahead, figuring he'd been walking now for a half an hour or more. He had to be getting close to the empty cage, but he saw no sign of it yet.

Soon fatigue forced him to lean against the cages to continue. That drove the occupants wild. Things slammed against the transparent doors. The Nameless One tried not to look, but couldn't stop himself completely. Tentacles seemed common. Most every grotesque color imaginable passed in a slow scroll as he pushed past the cages. Claws adorned some while little mouths on the ends of appendages adorned others. The Nameless One hoped the glass held until he got out of there.

'Just drop off the spirit beyond the Gates of Hell' The Priestess said. Should have known when it sounded too easy. Now I'm probably gonna die down here and no one will even realize I'm missing.

He shook himself. The depressive atmosphere crept into his mind. The Nameless One understood now why no one ever succeeded before.

The oppressive weight of the room drove The Nameless One to his knees. He tried to stand again, but collapsed. He grit his teeth and crawled.

This necessity struck something in The Nameless One, something that drove him to fight back. He had a perverse desire to laugh, but that took too much energy.

Limbs shaking, he paused to rest and study the path ahead of him. He'd been at this for hours now despite the timelessness in this place. There. Certainty that he'd found the place washed over him. No sign of anything reacting to his presence, like there had been in every other cage so far, greeted the Nameless One.

A sliver of hope threaded through the exhaustion as he pushed on again. His entire body was more worn than a fighter who withstood ten straight rounds. Nevertheless, The Nameless One fought on. Half an eternity later he reached the cage in question.

As he reached the cage he aimed for, something smashed against the glass. Transparent gelatinous goo plastered itself to the front. He caught a glimpse of half-digested limbs suspended inside. A gaping maw worried at the glass. The only thing solid appearing in the creature were multiple rows of sharp teeth.

The Nameless One had no energy to get away from the glass. He just laid there watching the thing drool and work at the barrier. The thought crossed his mind to wait for it to break free and finish him. Not that he wanted to die, but it would be so much easier than continuing on.

He touched his shirt pocket. The necklace, bracelet, and battered photo were still there despite everything. As at home, these things gave The Nameless One strength. He managed to pull himself away from the clear gelatin monster's cage.

The strength he'd gained faded fast. The Nameless One dug down into every last reserve he had and realized he didn't have enough. He didn't have the ability to finish this. As a teenager, he always wondered what his limits were. He had his answer now.

The Nameless One collapsed. Sterile coolness soothed his aching battered body and exhausted soul. His mind wandered as he laid there. The Nameless One replayed his journey here. How he bargained with The Priestess for a chance at redemption. Images from his childhood. His wedding day. His daughter's birth. Then the spirits came. They annihilated every happy memory.

"This what comes of stopping. Must imprison spirit."

Nybbas wasn't there. Few demons possessed the power to enter here, yet he heard the demon's smooth voice whispering in his ear.

The Nameless One pushed himself to all fours and stifled a groan. He'd learned things like that only made the residents even more agitated. And he didn't trust the prison cells to hold their inmates should they attempt to escape. After all, The Nameless One had been fighting them for years and knew their abilities well.

Pain threatened to swallow The Nameless One whole as he forced himself down that path. He'd foolishly thought he knew pain prior to this new world of agony.

Somehow, though, the pain became his ally as it cocooned him. The spirits no longer rattled their prison cells and the spirit within him practically vanished. Even the prison itself grew hazy. Little existed outside the pain.

"Must stop. Cage there."

It took The Nameless One a moment to register the words whispered into his mind before they sunk in and he collapsed. He pried his leaden eyes open and saw the empty cell.

"Now what?"

Silence met his question. The pulsating pain that cradled him his only answer. He wanted to give up, having suffered all the agony to get this close to what The Priestess promised, only to be stopped by something so simple.

The Nameless One had no key.

Anger dulled the misery as he used the glass to lever himself to his feet. The answer must be there. He leaned his head and arms against the glass to think. Nybbas wouldn't have sent him in without that, would he?

Then it hit him and the answer seemed so simple. The Nameless One lifted his head from the glass and flattened both hands.

"Go. Be gone. Harm no one ever again."

A little ostentatious, but it works.

He waited for several seconds. Nothing happened. When The Nameless One was about to give up, something shifted. A burning sensation started deep in his stomach. It spread, intensifying, as it moved through him. Before long, a sensation like lava streamed through The Nameless One's veins. He tipped his head back to scream but choked in silence as a thick

blackish brown vapor spewed forth. It twisted and turned but something channeled it into the cell.

When the fountain of brackish fog ended, he collapsed. The first thing he noted was that the constant hurt dulled into an intense ache instead. The Nameless One forced himself to open his eyes again. He saw the cell roiling with a thick smoke-like thing. Claws and teeth appeared and disappeared at random as he watched.

The euphoria of relief set in. Somehow, The Nameless One had made it this far. He returned the spirit through the Gates of Hell as The Priestess commanded. Now he needed to figure out how to get home. Then The Priestess would have to keep her word.

The Nameless one needed to get out of this prison. He turned and stumbled back down the path in a drunken stagger. As he banged into the glass, the spirits inside grew increasingly aggressive. It wasn't long before The Nameless One had to admit he had no strength to walk. To try was suicide with the way the residents acted.

He crawled again, his head dangling, and his arms visibly quaking. This time, instead of agony as a companion, dreams of returning to The Priestess for his reward accompanied him. The Nameless One lost track of time as he worked his way back at the barrier where the resistance set in. It reminded him of a gigantic rubber band, only it worked to keep him inside the prison. With his strength sapped beyond measure, The Nameless One hesitated for a moment wondering if he would make it back through.

As he labored, a question came to mind. If demons could not cross, how were the spirits locked up? The Priestess said no one ever succeeded before, so how did this demented fun house of a place beyond the limits of Hell exist?

Curiosity spurred him. The Nameless One pushed ahead, this time on his knees. Just as before, the tension increased exponentially. At the height of the resistance, something in his head exploded. The colors and pressure were unlike anything The Nameless One had ever experienced. The energy disappeared like water down a drain as every reserve he owned evaporated. He fell forward, the ground rushing up at him.

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The Nameless One found himself floating in nothingness again. This darkness was comforting, unlike the last one which radiated cold and

punishment. Once again, he found himself tempted to stay and instinctively understood it was an option this time.

But something interrupted the peacefulness The Nameless One found in the void. He fought to stay there, but something, no someone, persisted in drawing him out of the tranquility.

“Up! Up! Must leave!”

The Nameless One’s mind was still in first gear. He blinked at Nybbas as if the demon spoke gibberish.

“Come! Must go! Demon Generals will sense spirit not theirs. Will investigate.”

He tried to stand but promptly collapsed. Gelatin didn’t even begin to describe his body.

“I can’t. Go without me. I’ve got nothing left.”

Nybbas scratched his head and stared for a long quiet second. Then he rummaged through his belongings and dug out an old tarnished medallion.

“Has power. Will help. Bad effects not problem most time.”

“What do you mean? Will it make me go crazy and throw poop at passersby?”

Nybbas’s brow wrinkles and he pursed his lips. The little demon was utterly lost.

“How will this help?”

“Will stop blocks. No blocks can move.”

It was his turn to be puzzled, Nybbas’s explanation didn’t make any sense. It must have shown because the demon growled and leaned in.

“Can think?”

“Yeah.”

“Feel pain so no do, right?”

“Right.”

“No pain means no stop doing.”

The Nameless One mulled the words over for a moment before he realized what Nybbas was trying to tell him, now he just had apply it.

“Okay, hit me with your best shot.”

The demon thrust the medallion into his hand. A heartbeat later it hit him. As The Nameless One’s nerves turned to liquid fire in the same nanosecond, he realized his poor choice of words. To his eternal gratefulness, the pain disappeared within a few breaths, as did the inability to move. He was elated.

“Up! Must go!”

This time the panicked note came through loud and clear. The Nameless One got to his feet in one fluid, easy motion and couldn’t help but smile. It had been hard to do that even before this journey.

“Lead on, my friend. Where do we need to go next on this tour?”

Nybbas growled at The Nameless One, grabbed his arm, and muttered a few words. He found himself in yet another room with no visible way in or out.

The Nameless One shook his head a little to orient himself.

“Now what do we do?”

“Your turn. Leave with Nybbas like promised.”

That caught him off guard. He hadn’t figured out how to get himself out of Hell much less what to do with the demon.

“It’ll take me a bit. I gotta get The Priestess to hear me first because she’s my ticket out of here. As soon as I can contact her I’ll see what she can do to help you, too.”

“How long take? No have long. Generals find if here long.”

Talk about pressure. No clue what I’m doing and now I gotta worry about demon generals?

“Okay, I’ll do the best I can.”

The Nameless One sat down and pretended to be deep in thought. He really needed answers because trouble had become an avalanche bearing down on him. Hoping to find some clue of how to get out of this mess, The Nameless One racked his brain for anything The Priestess said over the years. Nothing came to mind, though. He wanted to scream and throw things. There had to be a way out, right? Would The Priestess really have sent him into Hell without any way back? Perhaps that was why the others never returned.

Fear and doubt gnawed away at The Nameless One’s soul. Questions built until it seemed as if he would be buried alive under a mountain of possibilities. Then, as if by magic, something The Priestess said to him back when he first agreed to her bargain returned. She told The Nameless One she would always know his location and his emotions. That way, if his life was in danger, she had a chance to intercede.

Funny. She’s never come to my rescue so far.

Hard on the heels of that recollection came something else. His wife drove him nuts with it. The Nameless One never understood how she held

onto it despite bad things going on her life.

She used to say have a little faith. She always believed things would be okay no matter what.

He settled himself and took a deep breath and held it for several seconds before releasing it in a long slow exhale. The Nameless One repeated this several times, allowing the muscle tension and fatigue to fade into the background and tried to focus his mind on The Priestess. With meditation techniques his wife taught him, he built every detail he could recall; her looks, her voice, scents associated with her, even sounds he remembered hearing around her.

When The Nameless One believed his construct of The Priestess was accurate, he gave it a kind of mental shove. He willed it to go to The Priestess, to gain her attention. Maybe that would be enough for her to get him out of Hell.

The Nameless One waited for quite a while with no signs his efforts were successful. With faith in his mind, he repeated the process. The second time he slowed down and created the image with deliberate intention. He added each detail with thought and care. When the image held every last detail The Nameless One could scour from his mind, he waited for a moment and went over the image again. It was dead on, he'd bet his life on it.

I pretty much am betting my life on this because, if this doesn't work, I have no clue how to get home. I'll be stuck in a room with no doors and a pissed off demon. Screwed wouldn't even begin to describe it.

He sent the image and waited, almost giving up hope in the process. As he tried to figure out how to survive telling Nybbas they were stuck, something tickled his mind. It felt like ants crawling through his brain. His instinct came first, The Nameless One tried to scratch his brain, but was a little taken aback when he felt hair and couldn't get to the itchiness.

"You're still alive. I'd thought you dead."

The Nameless One blinked several times and swore he heard The Priestess's voice, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm in your mind. And, no, not as a figment of your imagination."

He turned red and squirmed. Had it not been that she'd confirmed what he had been thinking, he'd have never believed she read his mind.

"Not so much read your mind as listened to the thoughts you're screaming out. Take a deep breath and relax. Then think as if you and I are

speaking in person."

The Nameless One did as instructed and the muscle tension loosed. For good measure, he did it again.

Why did you think me dead? It's only been a few days at most.

"No, it's been three months since I lost contact with you and five since you left me."

What? That's impossible!

"Not impossible because time flows differently in other dimensions. Where is the spirit you were charged with?"

He didn't answer right away because the five months The Priestess just pointed out continued running loops in his mind, blocking out the capacity for any other thought.

"Focus! What happened to the spirit?"

The Nameless One shook himself like a dog soaked in water and honed in on The Priestess's words.

The spirit is secured in some kind of jail on the other side of the Gates of Hell. Needed some help to find it though. It wasn't as easy as you made it seem.

"Who helped you?"

A demon named Nybbas. He took a deep breath and decided to plunge ahead full blast now that the subject had been broached. *He said he'd help me if I promised to get him out of Hell.*

The Priestess's silence was like a cartoon anvil crashing down on him. The Nameless One waited for a long while and fidgeted, unable to contain the nervous energy. In the drawn-out quietude, he worked up the courage to question The Priestess.

Did I do something wrong? I didn't exactly have a ton of instructions. An abduction and torture didn't help either.

The silence continued to stretch to a point beyond awkward. He began to think The Priestess had left.

"No, I'm still here. These are unexpected developments. We must discuss the details of your journey."

No offense meant, but can that wait until you get me back to where I belong?

"There is the question of Nybbas. You said he helped you?"

Yeah. He got me away from the demons beating the crap out of me and helped me imprison the spirit you sent me here to drop off.

She went quiet in The Nameless One's head again. While waiting for something, anything, from her, his legs started to tighten up from sitting still so long. It crossed his mind that Nybbas might be wondering what's going on. Just as he decided to open his eyes and explain, he could sense The Priestess's return.

"You are responsible for Nybbas. If he harms anyone here it will be as if your hand caused it, do you understand?"

Yes.

"Why are you willing to do this for a demon? It is not in his nature to refrain from hurting others."

Because he helped me. He didn't have to but he did hoping I would help him in return.

"You are not the same man anymore."

I know.

"I will let you know when it is time. Wait until then."

Just as abruptly as she had tapped into his mind, she was gone. The Nameless One opened his eyes to find Nybbas gone. The demon had left some food and a blanket, which were the only other things in the room. With a sigh, The Nameless One ate and stretched out on the blanket. After a few minutes, he decided to unfold it a little to cover up as he found himself shivering.

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Ironic that I'd need a blanket in Hell. For all the flames and such, it's surprisingly cool around here.

The Nameless One drifted to sleep in the absolute stillness of the room with unbroken walls surrounding him. He slept deep, long and dreamless. When he woke, he found Nybbas leaning against the far wall, eyes closed and unmoving.

"Find way out? Must leave soon. Generals know spirit imprisoned. Looking for one who did."

"The Priestess is working on it. She will let me know as soon as she can bring us home."

"Priestess? She no willing to help Nybbas."

The flat notes of dejection and certainty in Nybbas's voice caught him off guard.

"Why do you say that? She said she'd help you, too."

"Nybbas demon. Priestess not help demons."

“Nybbas, I think you’re going to be an exception to the rule. She told me she would help us both get out of here. I’ve known her for years and she’s never gone back on her word that I have ever seen or known.”

“Good you believe. Nybbas cannot.”

“Time to learn a new way of life, my friend. Faith is a good thing.”

“Why?”

He paused. The little demon had a good point. Could he really explain why it was so important? The Nameless One watched Nybbas’s face fall at the lack of a response. It’d been a long time since he had some faith in something, he realized, and found it hard to explain.

“It’s important because it’s what gets you through tough times, gets you through all the bull life hands you. If you didn’t have faith, there’d be no point in living anymore.”

Nybbas studied him. He wasn’t sure what the demon was looking for, but he must have found something because he shifted around until he was lying facing the wall.

“Good night, Nybbas.”

The Nameless One wasn’t sure if it was night or not, but it seemed appropriate. He settled himself onto the blanket and stared at the ceiling for a long time reflecting on what he’d said to Nybbas. In the end, he knew in his heart he still believed in faith. Though it had been hidden under the seemingly unending hell his life had been for the last few years, his faith was still there. Some small part of him still believed things would get better. It was why The Nameless One chose to accept The Priestess’s offer. He’d never hoped to die. If he had, he could have let it happen in any one of the numerous battles he’d fought for her, but he never did. And this odd, mixed up friendship with a demon helped him see the truth of it.

He was just about asleep when the ants danced in his brain again. After he sat up, The Nameless One rubbed his eyes and stretched.

Good evening, Priestess.

“You *are* different. This bears much questioning, but it must wait. All is ready to bring you back, you and the demon.”

Excellent. I told him you would help him. I think he still doubts me, but this will show him.

“You must be in contact with the demon. Then repeat the words ‘Novas veritum marnieas voratu lum’, at which you will be brought home.”

Novas veritum marnieas voratu lum. Got it. We will be there before you can blink.

"It will take longer than that."

I didn't mean it literally.

"Go. Bring the demon with you."

Yes, ma'am.

The Nameless One felt the ants crawl away. There seemed to be an odd vibe to it this time, as if the ants were stomping rather than just walking. It also left him with an interesting conundrum. One he wanted solved as soon as possible. How did one wake a sleeping demon without being eaten alive? Not that he thought Nybbas would eat him, but The Nameless One was sure the demon had some nasty tricks up his sleeve.

"Nybbas, time to go. You awake?"

"Nybbas no sleep. Not need. Nybbas leave now."

"Yeah. Like I said, time to go. Get over here so I can take you with."

"You taking Nybbas?"

"Do I have to say it again? Get your tail over here. No offense, but I've had enough of Hell and I'm looking forward to going home. So, let's go."

He had to smile at the incongruous picture in front of him. A demon bouncing up and down with excitement just like a two-year-old. The Nameless One never banked on seeing that in his life.

He took Nybbas by the arm and repeated the words The Priestess gave him.

That's when it all began to fall apart as the cavern melted into a swirling mass, and a painful melting sensation penetrated his mind and spread through his body. It continued for several seconds before abruptly ceasing.

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The Nameless One's eyes felt stapled shut. Knives sliced into them as he tried to peel them open. Something seemed different, but he couldn't place what. He blinked past the tears streaming down his face from the pain of the bright sunshine and looked around. When he saw The Priestess's altar before him and her house in the background, he knew he had made it home.

He looked around for Nybbas, but didn't see him. The Priestess was nowhere to be found either.

"Hello?"

No one answered. The Nameless One worked his way to his feet one sharp joint crack and muscle twinge at a time. He staggered toward the house as if he was drunk though he hadn't had a drop of alcohol in three years.

"Did I make it home or am I stuck in the Twilight Zone?"

The Priestess appeared in front of him so close he almost walked into her. He had no clue where she'd come from.

"There you are. Where's Nybbas?"

"I have contained him for now. Come."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean contained? I told him you were cool and you would help him. What happened to that?"

"I never agreed to such things. Now come before I change my mind."

She turned and stalked into the house leaving him no choice but to follow her. He needed to find and free Nybbas, even if that meant going up against The Priestess.

Though I sure hope it doesn't come to that. She would mop the floor with me if I tried, and I would have to try because I owe Nybbas big time.

Inside the house every shade had been dropped, and every curtain closed. In the center of the spacious living room chalk etched across the hardwood floors formed a bizarre pattern. Candles sat at random appearing intersections while gemstones, some of them priceless, lay at other junctures. The overall effect appeared to be a toddler's art project. In the center of the mess was Nybbas.

"Nybbas! Are you okay?"

The Nameless One made to go for the demon who looked miserable huddled up on the floor, but The Priestess's arm shot out barring his way.

"If you cross those lines they will trap you in there with him. The only way to free him is to do as I say. Do not bother speaking with him again for he cannot hear you. He is suspended between worlds."

"Name your price. Nybbas deserves freedom."

He curled his fists and clenched his teeth, his body shaking as he did so.

"Why do you care so about this demon? Does he know you hunt his kind?"

"Yes, he knows who I am, what I do. He helped me, remember? I care because he helped me. He risked his life for no other reason than he believed I would help him escape. At the time, I didn't really believe I'd

get out of there but I was willing to go on a little faith. He went out of his way to help me when he gained nothing by it. Nybbas deserves my aid and he's well on his way to earning my loyalty as a friend, too."

The Priestess scrutinized The Nameless One. Then she leaned down and picked up a small glass.

"Drink this. I will show you the truth of the demon you've chosen to befriend."

"It won't change anything."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes."

To prove it, he snatched the glass from her hand and slammed the contents. As the viscous liquid hit his tongue, he found himself glad he did. It didn't take long for the visions to start. Images of Nybbas laughing as victims of his dreams and visions screamed, cried, and begged for Nybbas to stop flashed through his mind. Several scenes found Nybbas covered in blood, bodies torn apart at the demon's feet. Then the visions disappeared. He took a couple deep breaths to steady his nerves and then faced The Priestess.

"I would still ask you for his freedom and I will pay what you ask."

She didn't answer The Nameless One, just stared him down. He imagined he could sense her willing him to change his mind. Truth or not, the thought just reinforced his determination.

"Tell me all of what happened since you left me. Do not leave out any detail."

"It's a long story. You might want to have a seat."

The Nameless One dropped to the floor, careful not to touch the magical barriers, and prepared to fight for something other than himself for the first time in a long time. His name didn't matter anymore.

Stacy Overby works as a substance abuse counselor for teenage boys by day and a writer by night. Her day job provides inspiration for many of her stories including her short stories "The Trial of Summer," "Karma Incarnate," and "Only Emma" released in 2016. She also has several pieces featured in OWS Inked, an up and coming literary journal. Her favorite writing genres range from high fantasy to dark urban fantasy, and an occasional speculative fiction or science fiction piece thrown in. When not at work or writing, she is playing with her son, hiking, camping, or involved in other outdoor activities – as long as it is not too cold.

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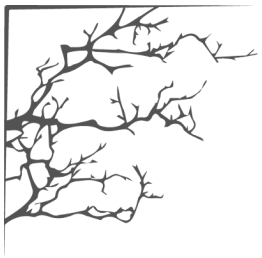

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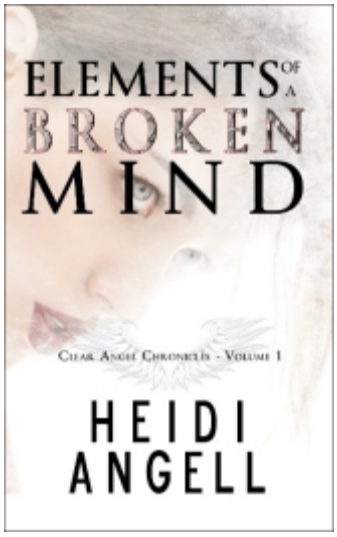
Heidi Angell



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G.L. McDorman

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The Quality of Mercy is an eldritch tale of madness and betrayal that asks whether kindness and mercy can survive in a world so corrupted by greed and violence.

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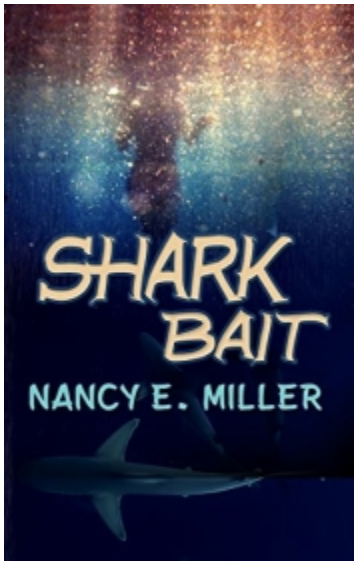
No Safety
T.G. Martin

Something about the raw, argumentative commentary of Charles Bukowski and the surprise of Shel Silverstein, suddenly discovering a new alleyway in a city they've known for decades. That feeling of familiarity within newness seems the impetus driving the passion of these pieces. No Safety delivers on the title's promise. Martin plumbs the depths of human emotion boldly, yet accessibly, conveying his experiences on the darker side of life. These works are exciting and fresh. Martin is unafraid to confront his demons in his honest and introspective premier. *Not intended for ages under 18.

To learn more, visit No Safety on OWS Website.

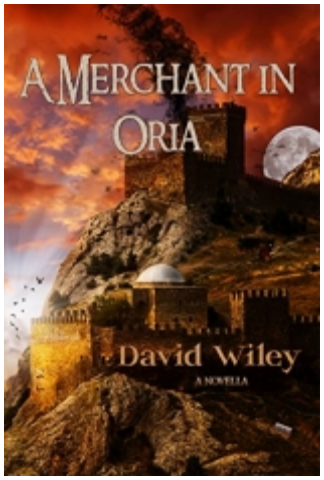
Shark Bait
Nancy E. Miller



Mental health counselor Kate Ainsworth received the call from Det. Rayder summoning her to the beach. Never did she guess that the trip involved a client's head washed up on shore. Murder and mayhem ensue with Kate in the crosshairs. Ben Rayder is set to protect the woman he loves and track down the murderer, hoping it is her pesky ex-husband just so he can arrest the rich bum. Can he convince her to give love a second chance after devastating betrayal? But first, he must protect her from becoming shark bait.

To learn more, visit Shark Bait on OWS Website.

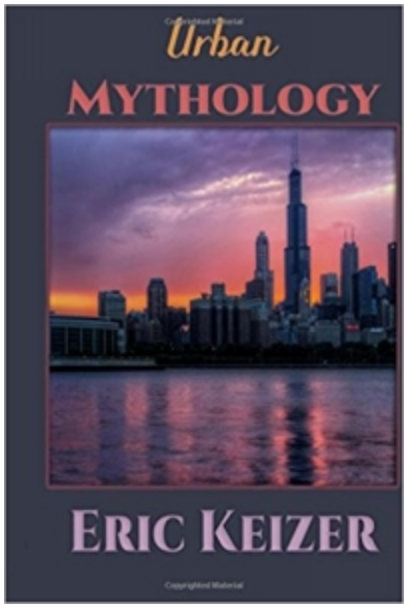
A Merchant in Oria
David E. Wiley



Firion is a young merchant descended from generations of merchants. His first big break comes along when he sets out to trade with the wealthy dwarven kingdom of Oria. He has always dreamed of visiting this grand kingdom, having heard his father describe it in detail a hundred times while he was younger. But when Firion arrives in Oria, he is jarred by the details present that contradict with the image etched into his mind. Something dark and sinister seems to be afoot in Oria, but Firion knows he is no hero. He is just a simple merchant, and what can an ordinary person do in the face of danger and deception?

To learn more, visit A Merchant in Oria on OWS Website.

Urban Mythology
Eric Keiser



Eric Keizer, in his first poetry chapbook, documents the places in, and the people of, Chicago who have made lasting impressions in his life. He celebrates the commonalities all Chicagoans share, while typing the Classics to modern life in the urban landscape, as viewed through his unique perspective.

To learn more, visit Urban Mythology on OWS Website.

Tales Of Our Write Side
An Anthology

TALES FROM OUR WRITE SIDE
An Anthology
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Mandy Melanson ~ Nancy E. Miller
Stacy Overby ~ Tara Roberts ~ A. M. Rycroft
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From Lewis Carroll and Shakespeare to tales that will keep you up at night, make you cry, and touch your heart comes Tales from Our Write Side, OWS Ink's debut anthology with 17 authors sharing 17 stories, 2 poems, and one creative screenplay.

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